

# Ontology, World Archaeology, and the Recent Past

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ARCHAEOLOGY BEYOND POSTMODERNITY: A SCIENCE OF THE SOCIAL, by *Andrew M. Martin* (Archaeology in Society Series). Pp. x + 247, figs. 6, table 1. AltaMira Press, Lanham, Md. 2013. \$85. ISBN 978-0-7591-2357-1 (cloth).

ARCHAEOLOGY AFTER INTERPRETATION: RETURNING MATERIALS TO ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY, edited by *Benjamin Alberti, Andrew Meirion Jones, and Joshua Pollard*. Pp. 417, figs. 74, tables 2. Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek, Calif. 2013. \$94. ISBN 978-1-61132-341-2 (cloth).

RUIN MEMORIES: MATERIALS, AESTHETICS AND THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE RECENT PAST, edited by *Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir* (Archaeological Orientations). Pp. xviii + 492, figs. 173. Routledge, New York 2014. \$205. ISBN 978-0-415-52362-2 (cloth).

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD, by *Paul Graves-Brown, Rodney Harrison, and Angela Piccini* (Oxford Handbooks in Archaeology). Pp. 864, figs. 140. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013. \$195. ISBN 978-0-19-960200-1 (cloth).

ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE MAKING: CONVERSATIONS THROUGH A DISCIPLINE, edited by *William L. Rathje, Michael Shanks, and Christopher Witmore*. Pp. xii + 436, figs. 28. Routledge, London, and New York 2013. \$220. ISBN 978-0-415-634809 (cloth).

THE EMERGENT PAST: A RELATIONAL REALIST ARCHAEOLOGY OF EARLY BRONZE AGE MORTUARY PRACTICES, by *Chris Fowler*. Pp. xii + 333, figs. 24, charts 6, tables 25, maps 14. Oxford University Press, Oxford 2013. \$135. ISBN 978-0-19-965637-0 (cloth).

Five years ago, Harrison argued that the modernist trope of archaeology-as-excavation no longer served the discipline well.<sup>1</sup> Instead, Harrison suggested that we invest in the trope of archaeology-as-surface-survey. Excavation presents archaeological practice as peeling back superimposed layers to reveal their hidden origins. The risk of this search for origins is that it occludes, or at least marginalizes, contributions to an unrealized present as well as opportunities to recognize the past still present, visible, and active in our world. For Harrison, the archaeology of the contemporary world offers a challenge

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<sup>1</sup>Harrison 2011.

to the dominant understanding of archaeology by articulating the object of study as the surface assemblage. This approach emphasizes the contemporaneity of objects on the surface while still understanding that part of the distinction between objects depends on the relationships between the objects and the past. While Harrison's call for a shift in metaphors is provocative for archaeological analysis, it also provides a playful point of departure for exploring an assemblage of recent works that have focused renewed attention on the material, agential, ontological, and relational character of the archaeological encounter.

The books in this assemblage draw on a body of scholarship outside of the discipline of archaeology and give attention to scholars who consider the philosophy or sociology of science. In particular, the authors reviewed in this article draw on Latour's groundbreaking ethnographic work on the scientific process and agency and DeLanda's critical reflections on assemblages and ontology.<sup>2</sup> The works reviewed here embrace the so-called ontological turn in archaeology and offer new ways to reflect on the materiality of objects and their place within relational networks that can include humans, animals, other objects, institutions, methods, and archaeologists. The focus on the embedded, entangled, networked, and symmetrical relationship between objects, humans, theories, and practices provides both a way to consider the books reviewed in this article and a new tool kit for thinking about archaeological work and the past.

Latour's work serves as a key inspiration for many of the authors reviewed here. Latour is a French anthropologist best known for his groundbreaking study of how science works through his ethnography of a prestigious laboratory.<sup>3</sup> While Latour developed a sophisticated understanding of how the intersection of objects, people, technology, and institutions affected the history and practice of science, his critique does not extend to include archaeology. Martin's *Archaeology Beyond Postmodernity* offers a Latourian vision for archaeology. For Martin, Latour's most useful arguments center on removing the arbitrary division between culture and nature that separated the process of scientific knowledge production from the objects of scientific study. This division dominated the social sciences, which used culture to explain the diverse

adaptations to the natural world. The natural sciences, in contrast, draw conclusions through the expansive and critical arrangement of data gathered through controlled methods. Major advances in scientific knowledge arise when scientists encounter "controversies" that reveal the incompatibility of parts of their data set.

In applying Latour's description of the scientific approach to archaeology, Martin offers two main arguments. First, he suggests that the preoccupation with theory in archaeology has limited the discipline's ability to produce compelling arguments for the past. In Martin's view, archaeologists have tried to explain archaeological material with theories derived from the social sciences and humanities. Their approaches have ranged from the use of critical theory, which interpreted archaeological contexts as texts, to persistent flirtations with Giddens' structuration or the *habitus* of Bourdieu.<sup>4</sup> Martin argues that this practice reinforced the division between the conceptual world of theory and the material world of archaeology and presented a parallel for the division between culture and nature. Martin begins his analysis at the level of the assemblage and crafts explanatory descriptions that accommodate as many of the artifacts as possible. With this approach, archaeologists give space for objects "to object" to efforts to force them into unsuitable relationships or constructions and to avoid projecting external understandings onto objects from the past.

The second half of Martin's book focuses on two case studies analyzing archaeological assemblages from burial mounds associated with Hopewell culture in North America and Wessex culture in England. While not nearly as well developed as the first part of the book, it nevertheless avoids the application of a well-articulated body of theory and emphasizes analysis at the level of the ancient assemblage. At the same time, Martin's analysis feels a bit artificial, since he fails to separate himself completely from theoretical traditions embedded in archaeological practice. In particular, Martin's brief case studies do little to recognize the place of the archaeologist, the archaeologist's tools, and the archaeological methods in producing archaeological assemblages. The relationship between pasts, objects, features, and landscapes includes our contemporary practices. The institutional, personal, and practical tools that archaeologists use to produce

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<sup>2</sup>Latour 1987; DeLanda 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Latour 1987.

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<sup>4</sup>Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1984.

these assemblages present complex theoretical residues of the archaeological discourse.

Whatever the limits of Martin's work, there is no doubt that Latour is among a group of scholars who have pushed archaeologists to become more attentive to materiality and ontology in their understanding of archaeological assemblages and objects. Alberti, Jones, and Pollard also draw on Latour, among others, in *Archaeology After Interpretation*. They urge archaeologists to move away from a view of objects as representing or symbolizing society or culture and advocate renewed attention to "ontological concerns" (25–7) that seek to situate archaeological knowledge in the interplay between materiality, objects, and humans. This interplay foregrounds the relational character of assemblages and archaeological ontology and challenges the idea that artifacts are defined fundamentally by an external context that allows for the interpretation of archaeological objects. The rhizomatic relationships between objects, people, and places shape new archaeological ontologies that owe more to Deleuze and Guattari (mediated through the work of DeLanda) or even Foucault than to traditional archaeological practice.<sup>5</sup>

The first and second sections of the volume explore relational ontologies and materialities as new interpretative strategies for archaeology. The contributions in these sections range from a reflection on the role of the archaeologist at the intersection of fieldwork and activism among mining communities in Ecuador to critiques of the concept of the "miniature" in northwest Argentina. Miniatures are only miniature versions of full-sized pots if we assume a scale in relation to the human form rather than the less corporeal body of spirits. The third section of the work moves toward understanding the relationship between material and social change. The authors explore the dynamic relationship between human actors, practices, and objects. Pollard's contribution considers the dense network of processes that emerged through the construction of stone and earthen monuments in Avebury (United Kingdom) and Polynesia. Fowler emphasizes the role of time in how we understand the relationships throughout assemblages, and he makes a key point: social change is not independent of the assemblage but emerges from changing relationships between objects (251). The final section of the book includes contributions that explicitly engage materiality and its

relationship with practice and production. Fahlander's careful reading of coastal rock art in Bronze Age Sweden demonstrates how various phases of inscription relate to one another, bringing time, expression, and materiality into the production of an assemblage.

The final contribution to the book comes from Lucas, whose work on time, objects, and archaeological methods looms large in recent reconsiderations of archaeological practice.<sup>6</sup> Lucas approaches the "ontological turn" through a consideration of the "ontological purification" (370) that has traditionally divided reality into "humans or things" (378). Returning to the main focus of the book, Lucas argues that for archaeology to do more than simply reify this division, archaeologists must find new ways of understanding the dense relational network that includes a diverse range of human and nonhuman objects. This shift not only marks archaeology's ongoing move toward the kind of Latourian natural science considered by Martin but also reflects a growing awareness of our own networked world.

Olsen and Pétursdóttir's volume represents the outcome of a four-year Research Council of Norway grant titled "Ruin Memories," and this work extends the ontological turn in the discipline to the archaeology of the recent past. The introduction explores how modern ruins, memories, and aesthetics influence what we choose to preserve and value in the modern world. Continuing the larger trend of exploring agency in objects, Olsen and Pétursdóttir suggest that ruins remember their original form in ways that emphasize the incompleteness of the modern world, and this requires heritage-preservation schemes that both preserve the state of ruins and recognize the constant state of change.

The editors divide the book into an introduction and five sections that focus on ethics and heritage, material memory, ruins and attraction, abandonment, and the recent past. The second section is the most theoretical part of this book and engages both "things" and agency. Latour again serves as a point of entry into the agency of things, but the authors here are also equally informed by Heidegger. Andersson's and Introna's contributions draw inspiration from Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Introna's "Ethics and Flesh" uses Heidegger's distinction between tools "present-at-hand" and those "ready-to-hand" as a way to understand the agency of

<sup>5</sup>Foucault 1972; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; DeLanda 2006.

<sup>6</sup>Lucas 2001, 2012.

objects and people when confronted with the decay of abandoned and ruined buildings. The discussions of agency and ethics in these conceptually demanding contributions offer a complicated framework for preservation and conservation of the ruined, modern-era monuments as heritage. The next two sections present an assemblage of critical approaches to archaeology and memory in the recent past. Many of the contributions offer the barest outlines of traditional archaeological practice, with the closest to conventional fieldwork being Olsen and Witmore's treatment of a Norwegian prisoner-of-war camp in the far north of the country. Bjerck records both objects and memories in his study of his recently deceased father's possessions. Burström maps caches of family goods from World War II in Estonia by folding memories into archaeology.

These essays make clear that memory and materiality are parts of the same assemblage. Other contributors explore less conventional approaches to documenting ruins. Bailey's work is a compilation of images associated with Balkan history overwritten with texts to present complex assemblages of memories and ruins in the shared space of the page. Sigurðsson's poetry and Elíasson's photography push the reader and the viewer to look deeper into texts and images that might not otherwise sustain scrutiny. The poetry of González-Ruibal's excavation report on sites associated with the Spanish Civil War confronts the emotive impact of sites of violence and death.

The final two sections of Olsen and Pétursdóttir's volume give particular attention to marginal zones that leave their haunted scars across the landscape: prisons, borders, frozen World War II outposts, isolated and abandoned fishing stations, empty academic buildings. These sites require adaptation of traditional archaeological practices to document places on the physical as well as the chronological margins of the discipline. The marginal character of these sites presents them as literal points of contact between two or more zones of understanding. In these examples and throughout the book, ruins both create and reinforce memories that embody past and present. The modern world remains unresolved.

The *Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World* demonstrates that applying archaeological practices to the very recent past has become a meaningful subspecialty within the discipline. The volume is dedicated to the memory of William Rathje, whose Tucson Garbage Project documented the household waste of communities in Arizona and

demonstrated that these intimate assemblages can reveal the occluded practices of household consumption.<sup>7</sup> Rathje's attention to the assemblage, rather than the excavation, set the stage for an archaeology of the contemporary world that emphasizes the relationship between practice, objects, and time. As the Olsen and Pétursdóttir volume develops at greater length, modernity, even in ruins, foregrounds the networks that bind the archaeologist to the site and objects, frame their judgements, and define the impact of archaeological work. The potential for archaeology to contribute to pressing contemporary issues such as homelessness, conflicts, waste, and disasters is intrinsic to the larger project of contemporary archaeology.

The first part of the handbook makes explicit the need for interdisciplinary perspectives on archaeology of the contemporary world. Harvey's contribution introduces the ontological perspectives of contemporary anthropological theory to the material world of archaeology; Webmoor brings science and technology studies (STS) to archaeology with the image of the knot representing the interconnected threads of cross-disciplinary work; Yaneva offers actor-network theory as a grounded approach to networks of humans and objects. Finlayson offers a word of caution from contemporary philosophy through a definition of things that resists conflating inanimate things with the broader concept of entities. The second section of the work serves as a glossary of crucial themes for archaeology of the contemporary world but speaks significantly to the discipline of archaeology more broadly. Issues such as "time," "ruins," "memory," "heritage," "modernism," "authenticity," and "scale" remain crucial considerations for archaeologists in any period. The final three sections feature case studies that explore mobilities, space, and place; media and mutabilities; and things and connectivities. The archaeology of the recent past draws particular attention to the location of archaeologists in relation to their work. Schofield's research into the gritty area called "the Gut" on Malta requires him to position himself as a safe but knowledgeable outsider. Rizvi's work on the gendered space of military checkpoints explicitly relies on the author's experience in the Iraq War as well as her gender, the fractured state, and her understanding of Iraq's archaeological heritage. Penrose's archaeology of the postindustrial body offers a compelling view of the

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<sup>7</sup>Rathje and Murphy 1992.

archaeologist at work not in some exotic locale but in an ergonomic chair at a laptop computer in an office.

A book of this length and variety requires more attention than a review article can give. This expansive assemblage of articles encourages the kind of reading that moves across the various sections and contributions. Archaeology for social change, the archaeology of late capitalism, archaeology and design, and the complex politics of heritage recur throughout these works. The issues locate the archaeology of the contemporary world less as a modern coda to traditional archaeological practice and more as a distinct position from which to offer critique of the entire discipline.

Contemporary, disciplinary concerns permeate the collection of interviews moderated by Rathje, Shanks, and Witmore in *Archaeology in the Making: Conversations Through a Discipline*. Like the *Oxford Handbook*, this volume lacks the structure of a neatly stratified deposit but illuminates a complex assemblage of disciplinary knowledge. The various conversations are grouped into three sections—the archaeological imagination, the working of archaeology, and politics—but many of the interviews could have easily appeared in any of the sections. The interviews were not focused essays or explicit contributions to a history of the discipline, and the editors resisted the temptation to distill them into tidy and digestible statements. Instead, the interviews present various “ecologies” (383–98) that locate the archaeologist at the center of archaeological assemblages that include objects, practices, individuals, and institutions.

The first section of the book offers some remarkable insights into key movements in archaeology: Binford’s processualism, Schiffer’s behavioral archaeology, and Renfrew’s interest in language and archaeology. These are set against Hodder’s expansive comments on the relationship between humans and objects, Wylie’s probing of the intellectual foundation of archaeological knowledge, and Watson’s frank assessment of being a woman in the field during the mid 20th century. The second group of interviews focuses on fieldwork, but like the previous section, it ranges widely. For example, Cowgill explains his flirtation with physics prior to his turn to archaeology and how his experience in the hard sciences paralleled the tension between the micro and macro in archaeology. Adrian and Mary Praetzellis discuss the practical realities and remarkable opportunities of cultural resource management with particular attention to their work in an African American neighborhood in Oakland. Kristiansen expands the

discussion by retelling his experiences in heritage and academic institutions in Scandinavia. Schnapp details his experiences in establishing institutional foundations for a sophisticated transnational archaeology in France. Alcock and Cherry discuss the political challenges of working in Greece and the opportunities associated with working in Armenia. Finally, the third section of the book explores the connection between archaeological work and political, ideological, and ethical realities. Tringham describes the Cold War political realities that shaped access to materials and research early in her career. Buchli explores the political decision to hide his homosexuality from his ethnographic informants in Russia. Leone describes his commitments to lobbying and political activism to promote archaeology at the local and national levels. Meskell expresses her concern for the political stakes involved in archaeology and conservation in South Africa. These interviews have firm connections with those throughout the book and emphasize the situated character of all archaeological research.

The book concludes with the editors sketching a disciplinary ecology across seven common threads ranging from politics, institutions, memory practices, knowledge designs, and affiliations with other fields and practices to more complex concepts associated with the common past (and futures) of the world, perpetuating gains in competence, and the work involved in manifesting material pasts. The interviews throughout the book demonstrate that these intellectual threads are entangled with personal narratives, institutional limits and opportunities, professional and personal relationships, and economic realities.

The interviews of Rathje, Shanks, and Witmore emphasize the archaeologist’s place within the archaeological assemblage and situate disciplinary knowledge within a network of practices, institutions, and knowledge. Fowler’s *The Emergent Past: A Relational Realist Archaeology of Early Bronze Age Mortuary Practices* locates the archaeologist in his ontological critiques of archaeological objects. Fowler approaches the assemblage of Early Bronze Age objects in Britain as an artifact of both archaeological practice and past events.

While most of the book’s seven chapters interweave Fowler’s relationalist, realist approach with specific case studies from Early Bronze Age Britain, the second chapter provides a focused and explicit theoretical critique. Fowler argues for an archaeological practice grounded in relational realism, which is based, in part, on Latour’s concept of the circulating reference that

recognizes assemblages as dynamic sets of relationships that constantly refigure themselves. Archaeologists, then, do not study an assemblage as a static object but actively participate in the reconfiguration of that assemblage through practices, tools, and theories. These assemblages constitute past realities that bring to the present the residues of their past relationships.

Chapters 4–6 focus on the archaeology of mortuary practices in Chalcolithic and Early Bronze Age Britain. Chapters 4 and 5 provide an extensive discussion of grave goods and burial types and their relationships to the larger settlement, natural, and monumental landscape. Chapter 6 draws on these data to present a rigorous synthesis of burial practices in Early Bronze Age Britain. Fowler uses Ingold's term "inversions" to describe the various relations that make his analysis of Early Bronze Age burial practices possible. Fowler stresses that these inversions are not fixed and depend, in part, on his own location in the field, the methods and tools used to analyze these assemblages, and, perhaps most importantly, the relationship between past objects and events. For Fowler, all these relations are real and are grounded in archaeological assemblages as they exist in both the past and the present.

Like most recent efforts to explore the nature of assemblages in archaeology, *The Emergent Past* insists that the relations present throughout assemblages constitute the basis for archaeological analysis. The tensions and attractions between the various parts of these assemblages, which include the archaeologist as well as objects from the past, present a particular shape. Some aspects of this shape are contingent on technologies, the extent of our evidence, and practice, but other parts of the assemblage demonstrate remarkable stability and will persist for millennia. The intersection of various forces within the assemblage not only produced the arguments in Fowler's book but will also influence future efforts to describe Early Bronze Age practices.

For Fowler, it is impossible to escape the legacies of archaeological analysis and interpretation because they shaped processes of artifact recovery, curation, and publication on which his work and much archaeological work continue to depend. In recognizing this, he makes the work of Rathje, Shanks, and Witmore even more important for any archaeologist who seeks to recognize the complex assemblages that constitute our field.

It is always tempting to view the latest theoretical or conceptual move in archaeological thought as a revelatory moment that will empower social change, produce

new knowledge, and open new vistas for inquiry. In fact, it is difficult to escape the positive, critical energy in these volumes and not recognize that these ideas are more than just the incestuous flirtations of the "theory crowd." These scholars' attention to objects and materiality falls neatly inside the traditional purview of archaeology. Renewed attention to the assemblage as a meaningful concept for articulating the networks of objects, landscapes, practices, and individuals that make archaeological knowledge promotes a reflective and self-aware discipline, but it also remains literally and figuratively grounded in objects, materials, and past practices. Whatever the degree to which we embrace the ontological turn, this trend in archaeological analysis reinforces the place of the object or artifact as the starting point of archaeological inquiry.

It is important to emphasize that these books do little to challenge existing archaeological field practices and procedures; nevertheless, they provide a way to reframe how we articulate the relationship between fieldwork, tools, and fragments of the past. The importance of this reframing is that the subject of archaeological analysis today is expanding chronologically to include the contemporary world, while the tools that archaeologists use to document the past have undergone significant technological change in the last three decades. Harrison's suggestion that archaeologists adopt the assemblage as the key symbol of archaeological work recognizes the relationship between past and present objects as crucial for the production of archaeological knowledge. The books surveyed in this review article provide a powerful set of intellectual tools for archaeologists wanting to consider this approach.

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