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**Peter F. Biehl,  
Alexander Gramsch, Arkadiusz Marciniak (Hrsg.)**

# **Archäologien Europas/ Archaeologies of Europe**

**Geschichte, Methoden und Theorien/  
History, Methods and Theories**

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ZBIGNIEW KOBYLŃSKI

## Archaeology on the ruins of ivory towers: What sort of theory do we need?

Perusal of the important and interesting studies included in this volume may reasonably lead us to conclude that the present times – at least in countries of the former East Bloc – are not favorable for the theoretical development of our discipline (see e. g. the diagnosis of the situation in Russia presented by Ludmila Koryakova and which, I believe, could equally be applied to the situation in Poland). In the 1990s, the comfortable system in which the state sponsored scientific research and in which scholars enjoyed high social prestige (not necessarily reflected also in their salaries) collapsed. Archaeologists woke up suddenly and realized they were working on the ruins of ivory towers. Shock set in, but gradually the realization that future archaeology would have to respond to the demands of society was accepted. Although it is obvious from the numerous examples presented in this volume, especially in the work of Staša Babić, Jürgen Kunow, Isabel Martínéz Navarrete and Predrag Novaković, that archaeology has always and everywhere been connected with politics and that the directions of its development were to a large extent stimulated by political impulses, until now this relationship has never been so openly and generally accepted or consciously enhanced by archaeologists searching for “clientele”. I see this as a real and final “loss of innocence” for archaeology. There were, of course, periods of quite recent European history when archaeology played a disgraceful role, supporting totalitarian regimes and (mis)interpreting archaeological evidence to legitimize military accessions. These periods however were usually relatively short and were later criticized and generally condemned (as in the case of the German archaeology during the Nazi period).

The present situation is different. There are fewer clearly-addressed political or ideological demands on archaeology, but what makes the moral choices archaeologists must face even more difficult are economic stresses on the discipline and on each particular scholar. Deprived of high social status and frustrated by impoverishment, archaeologists are confronted with temptations of the new consumer society.

Further funding (and therefore the existence) of our discipline is possible, as archaeologists have recently learned, in three ways. The first is when one engages in rescue research that is financed by developers. A good example of this is in Poland, where archaeologists are suddenly exhibiting interest in legal matters and in the conservation tasks previously being the domain of the state services for archaeological heritage protection. Suddenly we are seeing numerous small private archaeological firms and enormous excavation consortia joining universities, museums and research institutes. The second is when the private businessmen or institutions, expecting spectacular and easily-understood discoveries, such as golden treasures or mummies, sponsor research. The third means is when research fulfils a “politically correct” goal, such as enforcing

the social acceptance of unification with the rest of Europe in countries aspiring to join the European Union.

Rescue activity is frequently of low-quality, tremendously summary and exhibits a lack of basic theoretical grounding. The archaeology of spectacular discoveries is equally non-theoretical, as the recent competition for the prize of the "Golden Shovel" in Poland exhibits. Such activities return us to the romantic 19<sup>th</sup>-century vision of archaeology as a hunt for ancient treasures (hence, perhaps, the acceptance of metal-detecting as a justifiable scientific activity and the co-operation with amateur treasure-hunters by some archaeologists). On the other hand, research programs which try to answer the socio-political needs of officials are usually theory-laden but seriously biased to reflect the goals of the financiers. For example, in promoting an emerging capitalistic liberal system, there has been recently great interest in exposing the leading role individuals played in prehistory and early history.

From a short-sighted, purely financial point of view, the present situation may be seen as favorable to the development of archaeological activities. Poland, for instance, has never had as many large-scale excavations as we have today. Still, it is quite dangerous for the future of our discipline, mostly because it channels the ways in which archaeological evidence is created and in which it will be transferred to future generations.

Independent of what particular theoretical orientation or paradigm we accept and follow, we are basically dependent on the archaeological evidence. As Professor Stanisław Tabaczyński stressed, it is obvious that archaeological evidence is not an objectively given set of "pure facts". We all know very well now – I hope – that we create evidence in the process of scientific discovery and its documentation. We all also know, however, that we do not create this evidence arbitrarily. There is what we can call a "soil archive", which we exploit and transform into effective sources of data for further studies. Applying the distinction proposed recently by Professor Andrzej Tomaszewski, theoretician of historical heritage conservation, we may say that from the immensity of archaeological cultural material we choose (and creatively transform) only a small part, which becomes then our archaeological heritage. If we take into account the horrifying pace of destruction of formerly evidenced archaeological sites, which, according to the recent *ICOMOS Heritage@Risk* report is now as high as 10 % for a decade, even in countries such as Ireland, where the natural landscape is preserved to a high extent, we must be fully aware of our responsibility for creating (and preserving) the archaeological heritage on which future archaeological studies will be based.

Therefore, it is not unimportant how we choose data from the "soil archive". We must insure our selection is representative and that the quality of data we produce is high enough to enable future archaeologists to build upon. Theoretical considerations within the archaeology of the former East Bloc did not usually take these goals into account and treated the problem largely in terms of a game of chance. There were, naturally, some spectacular outstanding exceptions, such as the ambitious state program for registering archaeological sites in Poland developed in the late 1970s and whose potential has not yet been fully realized. On the other hand, the "western" theoretical trends of the past three decades – including processual and postprocessual archaeology – offered solutions which were as equally dangerous as the lack of theory.



The “new archaeology” in its “problem-orientation” suggested that the only sites worth studying and preserving are those relevant to solving the problems assumed scientifically “significant” at the moment. The concept of “data redundancy”, developed on grounds of such an assumption, is extremely dangerous for the future of archaeology since it can be used as an argument justifying destruction of archaeological sites that have been authoritatively declared “insignificant”.

On the other hand, postprocessual archaeology, which criticizes the concept of the material authenticity of archaeological heritage and argues that various copies, imitations and simulacra are as valuable for social perception and “re-construction” of history as the real archaeological sites, sometimes goes so far as to accept the destruction of heritage as an inevitable and normal process. Consequently, some postprocessualists negate the need to preserve archaeological sites.

Both these approaches, although they may appear extremely attractive, as they diminish the funds necessary for archaeological field research and lessen efforts in conservation, are equally wrong from the point of view of theory of archaeological source.

The notion of “significance” for example is a historically changeable and subjective one. Someone can always argue that a site has (or has not) significance for someone, from some point of view, at some point and time. The history of archaeology is full of examples of mistakes in which important archaeological evidence was deemed “insignificant” and then was destroyed. Since our perception of problems as significant or insignificant is always related to the present time and space, we are not able to predict what will be significant for future research. Therefore, as Curtis Schaafsma once said, all archaeological evidence must be considered “significant until proven otherwise”. This does not, of course, mean a return to positivism and to the non-reflective and passive collection of data in hopes that a mass of “pure facts” will miraculously transform into objective knowledge about history. It does mean, however, that we are responsible not only for solving problems which are of interest for us now, but also for thinking of those problems that may emerge in the future.

Since the famous conference in Nara in 1994, the western world has become more aware that material authenticity is not the only dimension of the socially-perceived authenticity of historical heritage. In Poland, the decision to rebuild historical buildings after World War II was an early, and not always positively evaluated example of such awareness. However, it is not only the structure, the form or the design of archaeological evidence that carries historical meaning. The very substance of archaeological sites and finds is also loaded with information. Post-modernist arguments to ignore the need to preserve and study the material authenticity of archaeological heritage are therefore as equally unacceptable as the disinterest in “redundant” data, which processualists display.

We are, unfortunately, not historians who have old documents to read and study at their leisure. Archaeological sites are not “texts” we can read freely and frequently as we try to decipher their meaning. We read the “soil archive” only once and even then we only have to our disposal the part of the “archive” which we have been able to protect. Therefore, while wholly appreciating the need for archaeology to answer social demands, to educate, inform, interest and amuse the tax-payers, we must not forget about the fundamental need to protect and make wise use of our “soil archive”.



There are two theoretical consequences of such a statement: the need for intensive protection of our "soil archive" (hence the need for archaeologists to be more interested in such traditionally ignored areas as the law and environmental protection, as well as the need to develop non-destructive research strategies) and – since the process of "reading" and "translating" each "document" into archaeological documentation cannot be repeated – the need for reflection on methods to ensure the quality of this "reading and translating". We must therefore maintain a high level of discussion on the ethics of excavation. Unfortunately, as we are forced to squeeze more (and more spectacular) archaeology from a single Euro, times are not favorable to these complex goals.

As such, I see an urgent need for agreement over theoretical divisions and for more international discussions aimed at reaching a consensus on the theory of archaeological heritage management. Such a theory should be based on the careful and comprehensive analysis of all the stages leading to the creation of an effective archaeological data and re-creation of history. This includes the socio-cultural process, the source-formative process and the discovery process, described by Prof. Stanisław Tabaczyński in this volume and to which I would add the process of creating historical narratives and popular presentations. This theory could bridge what has been described as the gap between the East and the West. Personally, I do not see this gap as dramatic. If gaps exist at all, I see them drawn along older lines than the ones drawn after World War II. I see them as separated by historical traditions of science in which German, Polish and Austrian archaeology can be put together in one category and British archaeology in another (in this volume, Prof. Stanisław Tabaczyński expresses quite well the inadequacy of the oversimplified divisions into "West" and "East" archaeologies). The postulated theory of archaeological heritage management should bridge the gaps also between "traditional", "Marxist", "processual", and "postprocessual" (and whatever else) archaeology, by creation of scientifically-based guidelines for the protection, conservation, excavation and presentation of archaeological heritage. Such a theory would be a very practical one and would have a direct affect on legal systems, on the organization of archaeological institutions and conservation services, as well on the processes of archaeological excavation, university education, the creation of museum exhibitions and popular interpretation. This "low-level" approach, directly applicable to various forms of archaeological activities, at the same time would also offer some "high-level" aspects, including a general theory of the new role of archaeology in society. Archaeology would no longer be an isolated and incomprehensible scientific discipline housed in "ivory towers," but a form of cultural activity participating in public life and was engaged in the preservation, study and revival of the historical heritage of humankind. Without such a theory, however, archaeology will always be only a poor and complaisant servant of various interest groups who use and abuse it for their own purposes. This is especially true in the former East Bloc, but not only in this region. Without such a theory, archaeology could easily be pushed back into the trap of political bondage and commercialization with low-quality, quick excavations which benefit the developers and with colorful curiosity of popular, open-air, pseudo-historical spectacles and festivals.