

Cultural Diversity in the Home Ground

How Archaeology Can Make the World a Better Place

Mats Burström

We are separated from the prehistoric past by a cultural distance. In the past, people had different cultural beliefs and ideas from us, and in this respect they lived in another world. Therefore, our home ground – wherever it happens to be situated – contains a cultural diversity; to meet the past is to meet the foreign. This realization can hopefully lead away from one-sided searches for the roots of one's own group of people. Instead it can form the basis for a greater interest in and understanding of cultural pluralism in the past as well as in the present.

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In our daily work as archaeologists most of us are so occupied with taking care of business that we seldom ask ourselves *how archaeology can make the world a better place*. And to even approach that question may indeed seem pretentious. Let me therefore make it clear right from the start that I do not pretend to have a ready answer. Nor do I believe that there is any definitive answer to be found. This does not mean, however, that there is no point in dealing with the issue. On the contrary, I believe that it is of the utmost importance that we as archaeologists reflect upon this matter; what is our more profound contribution to society at large? What are the particular qualities that archaeology has to offer the general public? We may find different answers, but no doubt they will all have consequences for the archaeological praxis.

A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

If we consider archaeology's contribution to society at large from a historical perspective, there is perhaps not so much to be proud of. The most obvious way in which archaeology has been put to use is to serve nationalistic interests (cf. e.g. Kohl & Fawcett 1995; Atkinson, Banks & O'Sullivan 1996; Diaz-Andreu & Champion 1996). Archaeological remains have frequently been used to justify the ownership of land claimed to have been held "from time immemorial." The development of archaeology as a scientific discipline was itself related to nationalistic interests. The creation of a common past was an essential part in the legitimizing of the European nation-states that were formed during the nineteenth century (fig. 1). National feelings were supported and romanticized by placing



Fig. 1. Guarding the national heritage. A Swedish army officer poses in front of an ancient monument. Photo: Algot Friberg 1923, ATA.

their origin in a remote past. Ever since, this kind of nationalistic use – or abuse – of archaeology has occurred in most parts of the world. The twentieth century contains an embarrassing amount of examples of how archaeologically-based arguments have been used by some groups to justify their claims for special rights.

In some countries where archaeology has been used very intensively for nationalistic purposes, there has later been a strong empiristic reaction to nationalism. This has resulted in an archaeology that is extremely descriptive, with the focus on typological classification and chronological studies. Available resources are often invested in developing scientific techniques for data collection and data organization, while there is a general suspicion of and lack of interest

in archaeological theory and more general interpretations about the past (cf. e.g. Fawcett 1995). This is, of course, a problematic line of action: if archaeologists just focus on “data” itself and are unwilling to interpret the past, their contribution to society at large may very well be questioned.

TIME AS CULTURAL DISTANCE

Considering the strong nationalistic element in archaeology, it is interesting to note that archaeologists since the beginning of the discipline have interpreted artefacts found in their native country by comparing them with artefacts from quite different cultural contexts. For example, Oscar Montelius (1843-1921), the leading archaeologist in Sweden at the turn of the nineteenth century, determined the function of a several thousand year

old stone artefact found in Sweden by comparing it to a handmill which at that time was still in use in South Africa (fig. 2). This interpretation was presented to the general public in a volume with the Swedish title *Vår forntid* (Montelius 1919), that is “Our Prehistoric Past” (my translation).

The basis for this kind of analogy is, of course, evolutionistic. Within this framework all peoples are supposed to pass through certain common stages in their “cultural development.” This makes it logical to compare different cultures over large distances in time and space. It is, however, interesting to note the matter of course by which these comparisons are made. As the title “Our Prehistoric Past” implies, Montelius describes the past in nationalistic terms and stresses that Sweden from the very beginning has been inhabited by “our” people (Montelius 1919:12-14, 71-72). In spite of this, he has no reservations about understanding the

prehistoric Swedes through comparisons with other cultures, often situated in spatially remote places.

Within a modern theoretical framework, people separated from ourselves in time or space can be considered to be united by the cultural distance that separates “us” from “them.” However, the cultural distance that separates us from the prehistoric past is far greater than any present distance. All of us in the present have more in common than any of us have with the prehistoric past. To meet the past is therefore to meet the foreign (cf. Lowenthal 1985; Eriksen 1993; Solli 1996; Olsen 1997:266-268).

TO MEET THE FOREIGN

If the past represents something foreign, how can we reach an understanding of it? We can, of course, never free ourselves from the present; it will always direct our research interests and influence our interpretations. And this is hardly considered to be a problem, because what would the alternative be? An archaeology ignorant of the contemporary world that only works with issues that are generally considered to be out of date?

Nor is the fact that we cannot free ourselves from the present necessarily an obstacle for reaching a more profound understanding of the past. Paradoxically, it may be just the other way around: it may be a prerequisite for such an understanding (cf. Gadamer 1981). As a foreigner one often pays attention to and reflects upon matters that for native inhabitants are so taken for granted that they are not even noticed. This is an experience that most of us have had as visitors to foreign areas. The same applies to the foreign in the past; as archaeologists we can notice phenomena and relations that were not observed by the people of the past themselves. Unobserved because they were so evident that no one even reflected upon them, or because people living then did not have the words, concepts, or experiences that make them visible to us. Some aspects of the prehistoric



Fig. 2. Bridging over time and space. A several thousand year old stone artefact found in Sweden, interpreted by comparing it to a handmill in recent use in South Africa (Montelius 1919:20).



Fig. 3. The cultural distance to the past unites all of us in the present. A Swede poses in front of a snow-covered burial mound in a suburb to Stockholm. Photo: Mats Burström 1998.

past can actually be more distinguishable from a distance.

What we consider to be “foreign” is, of course, dependent on our own cultural beliefs and ideas. A conclusive argument for focusing on the foreign in the past is that it stresses the right of prehistoric people to remain different from us.

UNITING ANONYMITY

For later periods of time we have written or oral sources that tell us about the identity of individuals and of groups of people. This means that there are some people today who in virtue of their kinship with people mentioned in the records can claim a closer relation with the past than others. The latter are, in a sense, excluded from history.

For more distant periods of time, where the archaeological record is our only available source of information, the situation is different. The prehistoric individuals and groups of people are anonymous to us; we do not

know them by name. This may actually be an advantage; while the historical records exclude many and therefore have a dividing effect, the anonymity of the archaeological record can have a unifying effect in the present. No one can claim more rightly than any one else a direct kinship with the prehistoric past. We are all united by the cultural distance to the past (fig. 3).

Today, however, the general public’s interest in the past is often seen as an expression of an interest in finding one’s roots. The roots are supposed to differ among different individuals and to be central for the formation of our identity in the present. In my opinion, an interest in the prehistoric past cannot be motivated by an interest in individual or ethnic roots since the remains from these most distant times do not belong to any specific group of people; they are the cultural heritage of humankind. I am aware that there are those who do not agree with this, among others some aboriginal groups of people (cf.

e.g. Layton 1989a & b; Gathercole & Lowenthal 1990). They consider archaeological remains in their home ground, regardless of their age, to be the remains of their ancestors. Many aboriginal groups also base their knowledge about the past on other sources than archaeology. Their right to do so should, of course, be respected.

Searching for roots and cultural continuity will, however, inevitably always have the effect of separating people and excluding some of them from the past. I find it more appealing and interesting to focus on the cultural distance to the past; there are different worlds to explore in everybody's home ground.

CONSPATIALITY

All over the world people have a seemingly natural interest in their home district. This interest also has a historical dimension: people want to know about the past in the district where they live. In this context it may be relevant to consider the concept of *conspatiality* (cf. Mannheim 1953:112). We are conspatial with everyone who in the course of time has lived in the same area as we do. The size of such an area can, of course, vary according to definition and embrace everything from the single village to the entire world. The area that is primarily intended, however, corresponds to what is commonly called one's home district (cf. Lundmark 1989:129-130).

The conspatiality motivates an interest in the past that is not based on the belief that the home ground contains one's own cultural roots. Instead, the interest is based on an interest in the area itself, the place where you happen to live. You do not need to have been born there to have this interest; you can have moved in lately, or you may even be just a temporary visitor.

The people that inhabited one's home district in the distant past had a different material culture and different cultural beliefs and ideas from ours. In this respect they

actually did live in another world. Thus, on the one hand they are foreign to us, and on the other hand we share something essential: we share the same home district, we are conspatial. This means that our own home ground – wherever it happens to be situated – contains a cultural diversity. I believe that this may indeed be one of the special qualities that archaeology has to offer the general public (cf. Olsen 1997:278-279). Realizing that the "foreign" is not just something to be found in spatially remote places but in our own home ground, enriches our experience of our home district. It stirs the imagination to think that in the same well-known place which we call home and where we live our daily lives, other people at another time were living in a world that was essentially different. They filled their lives and their surroundings with other meanings than ours. We share the same place yet we live in different worlds.

I believe that the archaeological realization that everybody's home ground contains a cultural diversity has the potential to contribute to society at large. It can hopefully lead away from one-sided searches for the roots of one's own group of people and instead form the basis for a greater interest in and understanding of cultural pluralism in the past as well as in the present. If so, archaeology has really contributed to making the world a better place.

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ABBREVIATION

ATA Antikvarisk Topografiska Arkivet, Stockholm. (The Antiquarian Topographical Archive, Stockholm.)

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