

Conversation in Front of a Megalith

A Contemplative Approach to Archaeology and Our Interpretative Existence

Håkan Karlsson

During the last few decades of processual and post-processual discussions, the relationship between the archaeological interpreter and the interpreted material culture has been highlighted from different directions. However, it still seems that some fundamental questions concerning this relationship have been forgotten, and that some existential dimensions inherent in it have not been brought forward in processualist or in post-processualist reasoning. In this paper, which takes the form of a conversation between three archaeologists, the “Dwarfs’ House” megalith in the northern part of the Swedish province of Halland is approached in a contemplative manner that takes these existential dimensions into account.

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PROLOGUE

The conversation below takes place between three archaeologists who are standing in front of the gallery grave called the “Dwarfs’ House” in Lindome parish in northern Halland, Sweden. *P.*, the processualist, is a rationalist by nature, since he is convinced that in our interpretations we can decode the original meaning of the material remains of the past if we only trust our objective methodologies. *P.S.*, the post-structuralist, is his opposite, since she thinks that this is impossible because our methodologies, our interpretations and our knowledge are influenced by their contextual frameworks and are thus dependent upon current socio-political thinking. *C.*, the contemplative minded, does not know what to think, since he feels that there is something missing in the arguments of both *P.* and *P.S.*

- P* An impressive monument. Let’s see, it’s 6 metres long and 2.5 metres wide. Quite big for a gallery grave, but it fits well into the list of late gallery graves in this region. When was it excavated?
- C* I don’t know exactly, sometime in the 19th century I think. I’ve read somewhere that Johannes Bureus mentioned it as early as 1603.
- PS* It says here on the sign that, in accordance with an old popular tradition, it’s called the “Dwarfs’ House”, that it was excavated by Oscar Montelius in 1889 and that it was reconstructed the same year as well as 1957.
- P* The “Dwarfs House”. Those poor peasants. Did they really believe in such superstitions?
- PS* Reconstructed, well, speaking of superstition: it must be quite problematic to

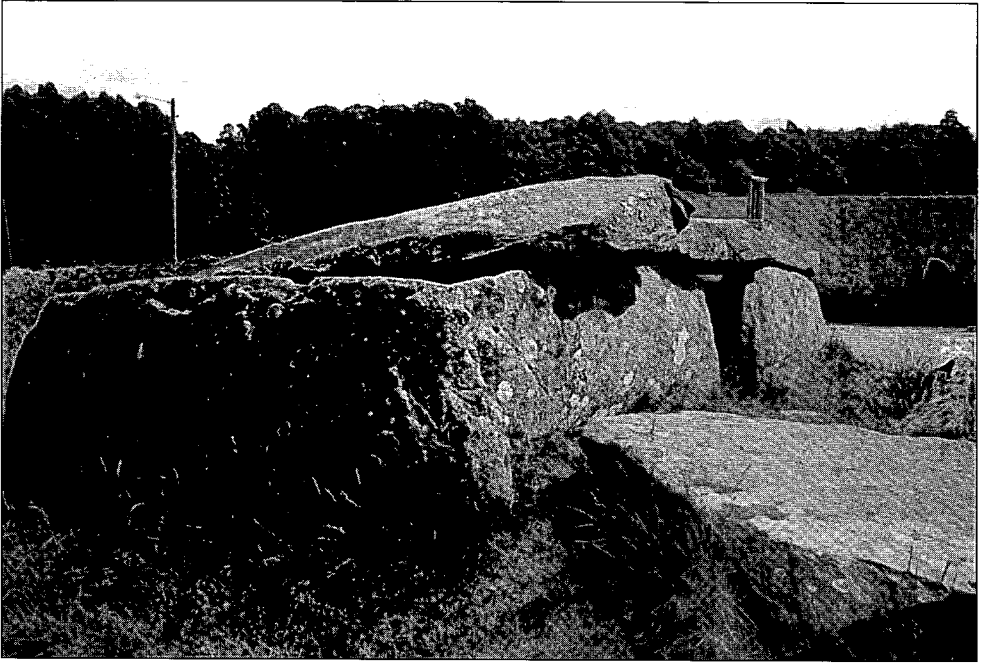


Fig. 1. *The Dwarf's House, view 1.* Photo: Håkan Karlsson.

reconstruct both the past meaning and the physical arrangement of such a monument.

P Problematic, yes, but not impossible. By the way, have you seen that thesis entitled *Re-Thinking Archaeology*¹, that presents what the author describes as contemplative archaeology?

PS You mean the one in 1998 from the Department of Archaeology in Göteborg?

P Yes, the one with the mysterious cover photo.

PS Yes, I've seen it. A quite interesting attempt to highlight the existential dimensions of archaeology, even if it's both generalising and mystical in some parts.

P Interesting attempt – are you serious? As

I see it, it deals more with the reasonings of that German philosopher Martin Heidegger than with archaeology. Do the arguments presented really have any importance or relevance at all for archaeology?

PS It take its point of departure in Heideggerian thought, and the discussion is probably unfamiliar to most archaeologists, that's true. However, I don't agree that the arguments presented are not relevant to archaeology. The book discusses the basis of our contextual and interpretative existence. That's good, but I think that the proposed contemplative approach runs the risk of becoming isolated from the political dimensions of archaeology.

P Please, don't destroy the pleasure of this afternoon by starting in on archaeological politics again. I know your views. But what about you, *C.*? Have you seen the book?

1) Karlsson, H. 1998. *Re-Thinking Archaeology*. Gotarc Series B, Gothenburg Archaeological Thesis No. 8. Department of Archaeology, Göteborg University.

- C Yes, I've read it. I found it interesting but somewhat tiresome reading. Heidegger isn't the easiest writer to approach, but I think the book highlights some important issues concerning our lives as archaeologists when it presents Being (-as-history) as the basis of our existence and of our ability to approach and interpret anything at all. This is a broadening of the archaeological discourse in a positive manner, and the passages about the anthropocentrism inherent in both processualism and post-processualism are very interesting.
- P I didn't follow the author in those passages. What does the ontological difference and the difference between Being and beings mean? Isn't that just playing with words?
- C No, not at all, Being is the process that makes everything that is manifest, that makes it appear. Thus, it's Being that renders possible and determines all that is, while being and beings refer to the phenomena that are.
- P It sounds as if you have been quite influenced by it. You are echoing these abstractions quite well.
- C That's right, the arguments were quite thought-provoking to me.
- P But isn't the whole argument concerning Being and beings playing with words and, more important, is this argument of any importance for archaeology? Isn't the Being of the gallery grave that we stand in front of the fact that it is manifest in a physical way?
- C No, I realise that the argument concerning the ontological difference between Being and beings is unfamiliar to both of you, because we usually refer to the Being of the material culture, for instance, this megalith, as the fact that it is manifest in a physical way and not as the process that makes it become manifest. In accordance with the contemplative approach, Being isn't the visible appearance of this megalith; Being is rather the process that renders it manifest, the basis of our ability to experience anything at all.
- PS It's quite hard to grasp. If I understand you right, though, the author means that the primary similarity between processualism and post-processualism is that both these approaches are unaware of the ontological difference – the difference between Being and beings – as well as of the unity between Being and human thinking, and that they approach beings solely as beings and never return to Being.
- C That's right. It's obvious that both processualism and post-processualism conceive of the Being of this megalith as the fact that it's visible and manifest and not as the process that renders it manifest. Thus, they just argue about its ontological status, while neither of them recognises the unity between Being and human thinking.
- P Is there a unity now? A moment ago, there was a difference. And what unity between Being and our thinking are you talking about?
- C The point is that the unawareness of the ontological difference and the importance of Being leads to a situation in which our human capacity to think is regarded as the most crucial and central activity on earth. Thus, this unawareness continues an anthropocentric tradition with its roots in Platonic and Cartesian reasoning, and it strengthens the dichotomy between subject and object.
- P I agree, but only if this criticism is directed solely at the anti-methodological relativism of post-processualism, where the empirical reality is unimportant and where the thoughts of the subject are the only thing that matters. But I can't understand how the author can say that a realistic and serious stance is synonymous with an idealistic one.
- PS He doesn't say that. Rather his point seems to be that, whether the meaning that we ascribe to this megalith is conceived of as

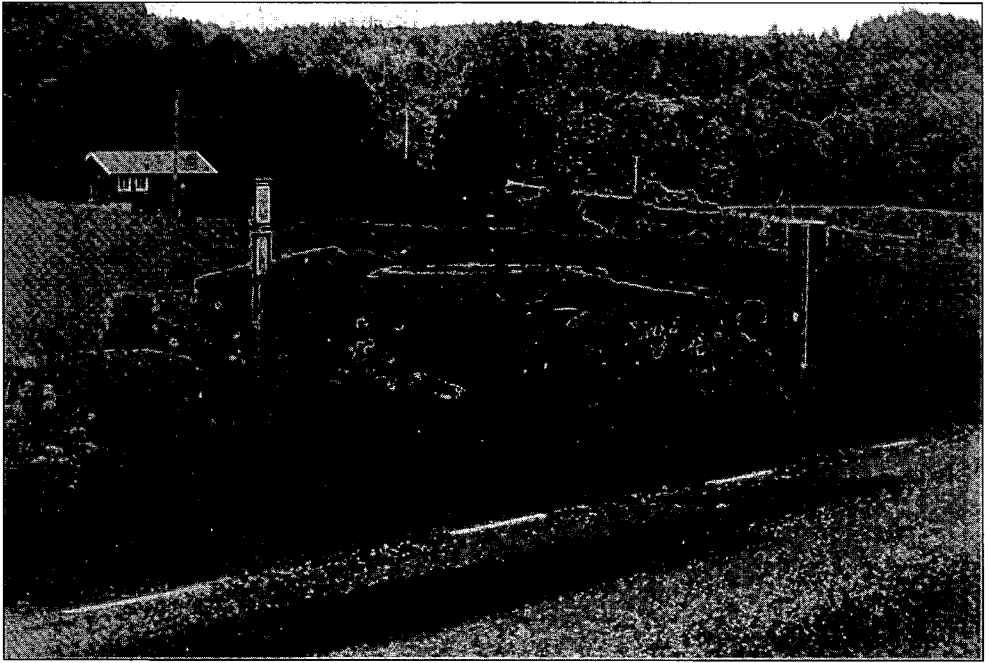


Fig. 2. *The Dwarf's House, view 2.* Photo: Håkan Karlsson.

a present, socio-political construction or is viewed as a product of scientific methodology, the ontological difference and Being are still being neglected. Am I right? And besides, you know very well that most post-processual reasoning isn't idealistic in its nature, since the ideas of the subjects are thought to be dependent on the context.

P Do I know that?

C Yes, you were right some moments ago. You can view the megalith in front of us as a part of the independent empirical reality or as a contextually dependent, present construction. But it doesn't matter, because in both cases the ontological status is at stake, not the process behind the interpretation. This gallery grave will still be here, irrespective of your different interpretations of it. The question is why.

P So you insist on the argument that there are no differences between processualism and post-processualism? That's ridi-

culous. The only way to grasp the meaning of this gallery grave is to propose a hypothesis and test it against the empirical reality.

PS What reality?

C Of course, this argument doesn't mean that there are no epistemological and ontological differences between processualism and post-processualism. There are, but the point is that these differences are secondary compared with the common ground in the unawareness of Being, and in the incapacity to transcend the dichotomy between subjects and objects, between archaeological interpreters and the interpreted things.

PS But I must once again argue that most post-processualistic reasoning doesn't regard our human capacity to think as the centre of the interpretative discourse; our thinking is rather conceived of as dependent upon the socio-political and ideological context of which it constitutes a

- part. The meaning that we ascribe to this megalith has nothing to do with the past or with any original meaning. It's rather dependent upon our present, context-dependent constructions of meaning. In this way, it is possible both to transcend the subject-object dichotomy and to de-centre the subject.
- C* But you can't get beyond the subject-object dichotomy that way, nor can you de-centre the subject. Since the socio-political context is a subjective human product, isn't it grounded in our subjective human activities?
- PS* It is, but your arguments put the basis for our interpretation of this megalith outside the contextualized subject. Do you mean that this is the way to get beyond the traditional dichotomies and subjectivity?
- C* No, the basis of our interpretations isn't put outside our contextualized thinking. The point is that our thinking is also grounded in something more than our capacity to think. It's grounded in Being (-as-history).
- PS* Are we to understand Being as something divine, then, as something absolute that determines our thoughts? Does the contemplative path lead us back to theocentrism, to a belief in a higher and absolute power?
- C* If we follow the author, the answer must be both yes and no. Being (-as-history) isn't synonymous with God, but it's completely right that it constitutes the basis of our thoughts, since our thoughts are to be conceived of as a response to the call from Being (-as-history).
- P* That is even more crazy than some of the worst post-processualistic outbursts. I can't see that there are any problems with the subject-object dichotomy. We are the ones who propose the hypotheses, not the grave. Aren't solid data enough? Your arguments lead to a point where this monument and I are not to be viewed as different entities, a point where the grave will interpret me...
- PS* No, it isn't enough. How do you know that it is a gallery grave at all? Before the so-called reconstruction, it was just a heap of stones. Perhaps I am beginning to understand the point, even if I do not agree. The contemplative approach seeks the ultimate grounds for our interpretative existence by placing the foundation (Being-as-history) in some kind of intimate relationship with our consciousness.
- C* Yes, something like that, though I think it's more appropriate to speak of a mutual dependence between Being and human thinking, since Being needs our thinking at the same time as we need Being to be able to think. This doesn't mean that there are no differences between us and the gallery grave. There are differences, but there is also a unity that precedes the dichotomy between subject and object. But you are right, this argumentation is striving to enable us to re-think our existence as archaeologists and human beings.
- PS* But if Being is determining our thoughts, is it responsible for all kinds of thoughts then? I mean, for instance, both processual and post-processual ones?
- C* Yes, it seems so.
- PS* But as I said before, how can one criticise anything under these circumstances? How can one take a political standpoint? Isn't the argument you advocate just a version of conservatism?
- C* Perhaps it's easier to take a firm position than to be open-minded, I don't know. The author means that our acceptance of Being as the determinant of our thoughts isn't an obstacle to criticism and critical questions.
- P* What is this mysterious Being that, in accordance with the contemplative reasoning, we are so dependent on?
- C* It's easier to say what it isn't.
- P* What an answer!
- C* Why do you need clear answers to everything? Are you afraid of uncertainty?

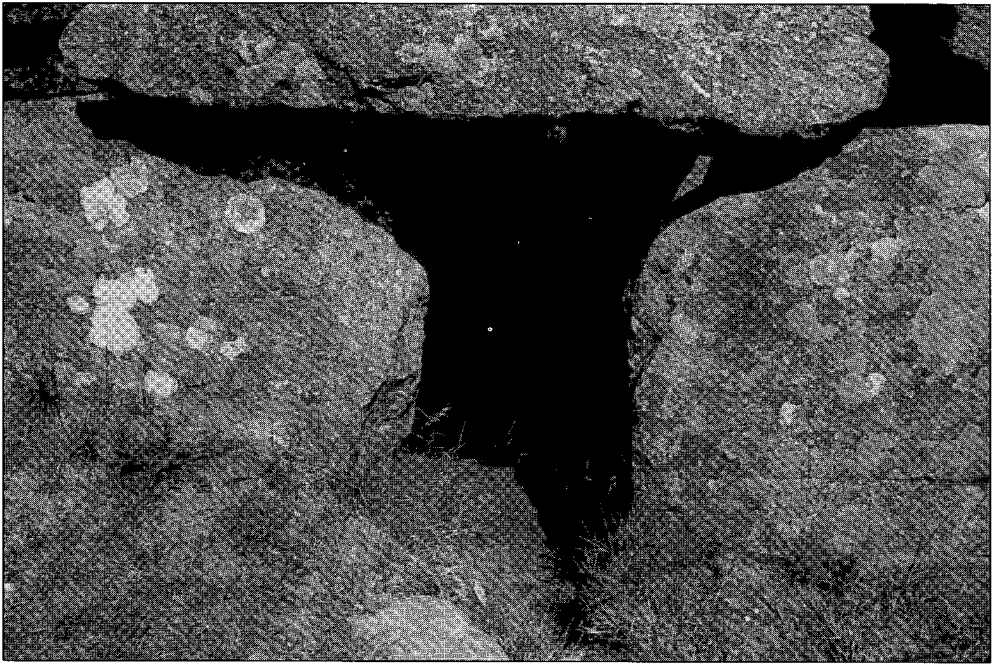


Fig. 3. *The Dwarf's House*, view 3. Photo: Håkan Karlsson.

P Afraid? Me? No.

PS Is Being the same as time, or tradition, or even memory? Time and our time-dependent pre-understanding are, of course, crucial in interpreting these stones as a gallery grave.

C Yes, I think you come quite close to Being when you speak about it as time or tradition. Undoubtedly, time and the tradition that we are thrown into are crucial for our transcendental structures of experience. But what is time? What is the essence of time? I mean, if you conceive of it as existential time and not solely as something eternal that you can measure with your watch, etc.

PS The author doesn't give the answer to the question of what Being is?

C No, he leaves it for us to discuss.

P Let's leave these abstractions for a while. How can you use this contemplative archaeology in archaeological practice? How do you interpret this gallery grave

with the help of the reasoning inherent in a contemplative archaeology?

C According to the author, a contemplative approach can't help us to a better understanding of the past and its material culture in any direct way, so I don't think it can help us to interpret the past meaning of this megalith at all. At least, it is mainly directed towards a discussion of the basis for our ability to interpret it in the first place.

PS You mean that an archaeologist who adopts a contemplative approach isn't so interested in what things are, but rather in questions of why things are and why we can experience and interpret them?

C Yes, contemplative archaeology is some kind of fundamental, ontological approach that can give us better knowledge of the grounds for our interpretations and a better understanding of our existence as archaeologists and human beings.

P As I said some minutes ago this is ridi-

culous, and the proposed contemplative archaeology seems, at least to me, to be completely without meaning for archaeology.

PS It's hard for me to see how a fundamental, ontological discussion of the grounds for our interpretative activities and our existence as archaeologists can be meaningless. To me, it seems that the discussion is greatly needed on this subject. At least for some of its practitioners.

P Needed? I don't know. If you ask me, the only thing we need is to return to a serious and scientific archaeology.

PS If one accepts the reasoning inherent in this approach, I mean the ontological difference and the relationship between Being (-as-history) and our thinking, then it can help us to a deconstruction of post-Socratic metaphysics, and to an alternative understanding of our existence. But what about our relationship to the things that surround us? This megalith, for instance?

C The author stresses that it ought to include a respectful attitude to other beings, not solely human beings, but also such beings as this megalith. The main problem with the anthropocentrism inherent in both processualism and post-processualism is that, when our capacity to think, or rather our consciousness, is regarded as the foundation of everything, all other beings become objectified and treated as some kind of standing reserve that is there simply for our benefit, pleasure or use.

PS Of course, we use the material culture in our ongoing existential projects. It's a dialogue in which we are created by the material culture and it's created by us.

C You are right, there is an opening for a respectful attitude there. We can't understand a specific thing if we don't use it in some kind of practical use-context, and we do understand ourselves when we exist in the use-context of things. We are always directed towards the world and its things.

That's a part of our existence, but has this anything to do with a dialogue? Doesn't this circumstance precede any dialogue? Besides, I can't see the dialogue in these post-processual attempts, since the material culture is only interesting when it has already received a subjective meaning. Is it really a dialogue then? Don't the material remains have a value of their own?

P Dialogue, respect – what are you talking about? Isn't archaeology concerned with past meanings? What does the contemplative approach say about the meaning of this gallery grave?

C It says that perhaps the most fantastic thing about this megalith isn't *what* it is, but rather *that* it is, and that it has the same sort of origin as ourselves, namely Being (-as-history). It's this megalith, or rather its Being, that gives us a part of the framework that we need for our orientation in the world for the moment. It can't be conceived of solely as an interpreted object that stands in a dialectical relation to a subjective interpreter. Being (-as-history) is the foundation of both archaeologists and their thoughts, and of this megalith, as well as of our ability to ascribe meaning to these stones.

P So the meaning of the megalith isn't inherent in itself, and it isn't a subjective construction? That doesn't make any sense to me.

C Both yes and no. The author doesn't reject the post-processual view of the meaning of the past and its material culture, as a present and socio-historically influenced construction. The point is that he views this construction as grounded in our temporality, and that the ultimate ground of this temporality is to be found in Being and not solely in our subjective and contextualized choices. Even if this megalith doesn't bear any final or original meaning in itself, it, or rather its Being, is still the source of what archaeologists know and do. It's still intimately connected with



Fig. 4. *The Dwarf's House*, view 4. Photo: Håkan Karlsson.

meaning, because the basis of our ability to ascribe any meaning at all to it are immanent in it. We can ascribe different meanings to it, we can interpret it as a grave, as the “House of the Dwarfs”, as a signal to aliens from outer space, or as a prehistoric calendar. We can be most interested in its symbolic dimensions, its function, its present socio-political role, its typological features, but the main thing is that it *is* and that it is occupying our thoughts.

P You mean that the search for truth is meaningless then?

C No, not meaningless, but the search for a correspondent truth is secondary. Truth can primarily also be viewed as the coming forward of Being.

PS So a contemplative archaeology discusses the primary level in our knowledge and in our interpretative practice, such as why this megalith exists at all?

C Yes, that's right. It works on the primary

level. It discusses how and why we can experience and interpret anything at all, on a level that precedes the division of the world into subjects and objects.

P But is this of any relevance to us, as we stand here in front of this gallery grave?

C As I have already told you, the author stresses that a contemplative approach does not include any methodology in the scientific sense of the word. Despite this, there is a methodological strain in it, and the methodology that can be constructed on the basis of a contemplative archaeology is, first of all, directed towards ourselves, our thinking and our existence in the world. Thus, the methodology inherent in this kind of archaeology is synonymous with self-reflection and questioning and with our thinking about thinking. Thus, contemplation teaches us something about the ultimate foundation of our existence and of our thinking, by stressing our intimate relationship to, and

- dependence upon, the ontological difference and Being (-as-history). It lets us meet the world more open-mindedly and respectfully than before, by showing us that dichotomies like past-present, subject-object, etc. are simplified in their nature and that our human consciousness isn't the sole centre of the world. Thus, it tells us something about ourselves and our thinking with the help of the things in the world. For instance, through a thing such as this megalith.
- P* Is this relevant to archaeology?
- C* I think so. If we in our interpretative practice reflect more widely in a contemplative manner, I think that we can learn something about ourselves. At least, the proposed approach is responsible for our conversation here today.
- PS* As one part of the archaeological discourse, it's undoubtedly of relevance, especially since it seems as if you can't speak of anything within the framework of contemporary archaeology without reducing your argument to a clear and distinct method that can help us to a better understanding of the past. But does the author view the proposed contemplative approach as some kind of alternative to other archaeological approaches?
- C* Alternative, yes, but it rather seems as if he is viewing it as some kind of complement to post-processual reasoning. He is positive to many post-processual standpoints, while at the same time he is trying to deepen and develop them. However, the ultimate aim of the thesis seems, at least as I understand it, to be a way of opening up and widening the archaeological discourse as a whole, for existential self-reflection.
- P* A post-processual provocation, then, written and produced by Being?
- C* No, a text produced with Being (-as-history) as its ultimate foundation. A thought-provoking text that gives us something to think about.
- P* So, to practise contemplative archaeology is simply to try to think about our thinking and its ultimate basis. That seems quite restricted to me.
- C* No, in the thesis the author lists some possible topics within the framework of a contemplative archaeology.
- P* Such as...?
- C* For instance, he speaks of studying the sociology of archaeology and the rhetoric of the archaeological discourse, and of experimenting with various ways of writing archaeology.
- PS* You mean a poetic archaeology, as already proposed by various post-processual authors.
- C* Yes.
- P* Now you are really starting to find each other. But would a serious archaeologist read such experiments? I mean, we are archaeologists not poets or sociologists.
- C* I don't know. Perhaps. Is the difference between writing archaeology and poetry or fiction so enormous after all?
- P* Yes, there are very big differences.
- PS* Well, I can't see that. All of us are writing fiction, even if we call it scientific writing, that's for sure.
- C* Yes, that's my opinion, too.
- P* Shall we hit the road again?
- C* OK.
- PS* A nice place and an interesting chat, don't you think?
- P* Interesting? Perhaps.
- C* Let's start the car, and go on...

English revised by Laura Wrang.

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In this article there are no explicit references to the texts in the above selected bibliography. However, they constitute some of the texts that have influenced the form of this article as a dialogue.