Review

A Postprocessual Step Forward

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Background

During the last three decades, theory has been an item on the archaeological agenda within the Anglo-American context. Since the beginning of the 1980s Western archaeology has also witnessed an intense struggle for theoretical hegemony between processual and postprocessual standpoints, a combat that has mainly been concentrated in the academic context. This is the case especially concerning various postprocessual ideas.

Today, the postprocessual arguments are, at least to some extent, an integral part of the theoretical discourse, and of education in many archaeological departments at the European universities. At the same time, archaeological sectors and activities outside the universities, for instance heritage management and museums, have been quite unaffected by postprocessual arguments. One of the reasons for the failure of postprocessual arguments to influence the activities of heritage management, museums and so on, is to be found in the theoretical fixation inherent in most of postprocessualism. This fixation has, for instance, led to an unfortunate neglect of discussions directed at archaeological method. Since most postprocessual approaches stress that the original meaning of the past is beyond our present reach, the need for most archaeological methods aiming at a reconstruction of the past has been questioned (cf. Shanks & Tilley 1987a, 1987b). Of course, archaeo-logical methods are dependent on, and a reflection of, epistemological and ontological views immanent in both the social context and in archaeology. However, it is not enough to state this fact and to argue, over and over again, that processualism is fixated on archaeological methods. And even if self-reflection is a necessary ingredient in the postprocessual argumentation it is not enough to view method as synonymous with text-analysis, self-reflection and critique, as is sometimes proposed (cf. Shanks & Tilley 1987a, 1987b; Karlsson 1998). This is mainly because it is not necessary to limit postprocessualism in this way since in the background of postprocessual epistemology and ontology there are huge, and so far mostly unexplored, possibilities to develop new and different reflexive, pluralistic and "open" methodological approaches, ones that better fit the postprocessual theoretical arguments than the methods used in contemporary archaeology. This is also the case concerning field methods. This means that theory, if there is no dichotomy between theory and method, must also make a practical turn. Abstract arguments must be applied in practice, and a methodology that does not work within the framework of dichotomies between past and present, theory and method, interpreter and interpreted, subject and object, (archaeological) expert and the public, science and society has to be developed (see Karlsson forthcoming). This

is necessary, or at least desirable, if postprocessualism is to be able to reach beyond the academic lecture theatres. And if the potential inherent in the postprocessual arguments is to be triggered, then the epistemological and ontological reasoning of postprocessualism must be put into practice.

In one sense it seems as if this methodological turn is exactly what postprocessualism has been going through since the beginning of the 1990s. Good examples of this are Ian Hodder's discussion of a hermeneutic excavation practice (Hodder 1991, 1992), and Christopher Tilley's arguments for a phenomenological stance when trying to understand the past/present landscape (Tilley 1994), and his arguments for a more "open" excavation policy (Tilley 1989). Some actual examples of this "methodological turn" consist of the claims for a reflexive and fluid methodology at the contemporary excavation at Çatalhöyük (Hamilton 1996; Hodder 1997, 1998, 1999; Thomas 1996; http://catal.arch.cam.ac.uk/), and Barbara Bender's, Sue Hamilton's and Christopher Tilley's "phenomenologically" directed excavations at Bodmin Moor (Bender, Hamilton & Tilley 1997; http://www.ucl.ac.uk/leskernick/).

These postprocessual field projects are quite well known in Anglo-American archaeology, but they do not constitute the only attempts aiming at a postprocessual methodology. The exploration of the frameworks and possibilities of postprocessual methodology (both in the field and otherwise) has just started, and this methodology will not be developed overnight. As we shall see below, these methodological attempts are also exploring other dimensions than field methodology.

Monumental Past

One of these interesting attempts is Cornelius Holtorf's Ph.D. thesis *The Monumental Past. Interpreting the Meanings of Ancient Monuments in Later Prehistoric Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany)*, which was presented at the University of Wales, Lampeter, in the spring of 1998. Cornelius Holtorf (born in 1968) is at the moment lecturer at the Department of Archaeology in Cambridge. Holtorf's Ph.D. thesis is unconventional as regards both content and form.

Content

Concerning the arguments presented in Holtorf's thesis, it can be said that he explores the question of how "societies make use of the past and how it becomes a part of each present and serves a function in it". As stated in the title, the study area is Mecklenburg-Vorpommern in northern Germany, and the material culture dealt with comprises megaliths. The author describes the key arguments of the thesis in the following way:

1. In later prehistory, the megaliths of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern were socially and culturally meaningful in many different ways. It is not sufficient to discuss their meanings in relation to one or two possible roles and functions only.
2. The megaliths in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern gained their meanings and significances in later prehistoric periods from the history cultures and cultural memories of their contemporaneous societies.
3. In later prehistoric periods, people in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern interpreted megaliths by connecting them with other ancient monuments and finds, with themselves and their ancestors, with particular interests, concepts and ideas, and with their cultural memory and history culture, as well as with wider worldviews.

This means that Holtorf, at least when it comes to the first two arguments, is approaching questions that for some years have been highlighted in the postprocessualist discussions, namely, the plurality of meanings ascribed to monuments throughout history, both in the past and in the present.

At first it seems that there is nothing new in Holtorf's argumentation except for the source

material and the study area. However, this is an illusion, since after a closer look the reader will find that Holtorf's work and his argumentation are very penetrating. He really works through the so often presented opinion concerning material culture and contextual meanings in a serious way; in other words, the phrases are not just used, they are also given substance. In accordance with the third key argument above, Holtorf also develops the discussion of contextual meanings when discussing this topic in relation to the prehistoric interpretations of the studied megaliths. For instance, he points out that in prehistory people interpreted these megaliths by connecting them to other ancient monuments and finds, as well as to themselves and their ancestors, their cultural memory and their concepts, ideas and to particular interests. Thus, Holtorf draws together and connects the interesting discussion of the past in the past (cf. Bradley & Williams (eds.) 1998) with the wider topic of the contextual meaning of material culture. Holtorf also presents very interesting thoughts when approaching the concept of "cultural memory". He uses this concept to denote the collective understandings, or rather constructions, of the distant past, as they are held by people in a given social and historical context. For instance, he says that references to the past reassure the members of a past or present society of their collective identity and supply them with an awareness of their unity and singularity in time and space – that is, a historical consciousness – by creating a shared past. From this it follows that "in memory the past is actively constructed depending on certain social and mental conditions", and that this situation is valid both for the past and the present. According to Holtorf there are no original meanings derived from the past to be found in the ancient monuments, rather they function as time marks and sites of memory, that is, as important parts of the process described above.

As we have seen, Holtorf believes that the reasonings above are valid both for the past and the present. This leads him to some interesting conclusions concerning our contemporary relationship to ancient monuments:

… there is no need to restrain creativity and initiative in dealing with ancient monuments today, because they would have certain inherent meanings derived from the past which must be preserved for the future. It is up to everyone present to redefine the meaning and significance of ancient monuments.

Holtorf's argument of cultural memory is both interesting and convincing, while at the same time it develops the discussion of the contextual meanings of material culture. In accordance with the quotation above, it also presents us with some highly interesting questions connected to our contemporary management of ancient monuments. Personally, I find Holtorf's argumentation very convincing.

In this context it should also be mentioned that in a good (self-reflexive) postprocessual manner the author also describes the construction of his thesis. There is a passage on this in the thesis, but for a full report of his experiences of writing and submitting a hypermedia Ph.D. thesis we must link up to his Internet essay (Holtorf 1998).

Accordingly, the thesis can be seen as an important and strong contribution to the postprocessual argument concerning the contextual meaning of material culture. However, as we shall see below, the thesis also constitutes an important step forward for postprocessual methodology.

Form

The first thing that one reacts to as a reader is that the thesis is paperless, entirely electronic and presented on a CD-ROM (so far the only one of its kind?). As a book-lover I was first sceptical about the whole idea, and to some extent I still am. However, the fact that the thesis is stored on a CD does not mean that it was written on a computer and then simply copied

to the disc. No, when putting the CD in the computer and starting Netscape, the reader realizes that it is not as simple as that.

In general it can be said that the thesis is constructed upon a large number of connected hypermedia links that connect the reader with passages of text (and thus with different parts of the thesis) stored on the CD and with references (connections) on the Web. In this context the author himself states that:

this electronic text is different from other archaeological accounts in that the connections suggested in the content of the argument correspond to the argument's hypermedia format, with hyperlinks … on every page. I argue for connections by making them.

There are several possible starting points leading the reader into the thesis. For instance, an *overview* (summing up the arguments), a *database* (a huge database of megaliths), a *glossary of terms*, a *bibliography*, a *map* (including the important locations in the study area), a *history of research,* and a *list of pages.* The latter starting point is the one that will remind the reader most of a traditional table of contents. Anyhow, it does not matter where a reader starts his or her journey, since the links will lead him/her to every part of the thesis, or to a limited and desired part of it.

As a brief example it may be mentioned that if one goes to the page *overview*, it is full of various links (the linked word or phrase is highlighted in blue), for instance to *later prehistoric, Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, cultural memories,* etc. If you go to the page on *cultural memories* you will find it linked, for instance, to *identity, construction* and *distant past*. The page *distant past* leads on to *social meaning, cultural memory* etc. The reader can surf around in the thesis in the same way as on the Web and end up with the desired information, at the same time as coming across interesting information by accident. This is both the strength and, at least initially, a minor weakness of the thesis.

An initial problem, at least for me, was to orient myself in the thesis, to receive a clear overview of its content. However, this problem was quickly solved when I found the *list of pages*, since all the pages that the reader has already been connected to are marked in a different colour. It must also be admitted that if I had used the link *practical information for readers*, located on the first page of the thesis, I would probably not have had any problems. On the other hand, in this case a table of contents is perhaps not the most important thing, since the thesis's various starting points provide the reader with good possibilities to follow up specific questions, discussions, monuments, items, and so on. After spending some hours with Holtorf's thesis, my initial scepticism faded away and the thesis seemed suddenly very much more "alive" than a text found in any ordinary book. In this context it should also be mentioned that it is of course possible to print out desired parts of the thesis without any problems.

However, even if *Monumental Past* shows us an interesting and important (postprocessual) methodological way of presenting archaeological reasonings, in my opinion, this way can never totally replace traditional books. This view is of course just a reflection of my own background in a pre-computerized society.

Conclusion

Holtorf's thesis is well worth reading for several reasons. (1) It is penetrating and develops some postprocessual discussions and arguments concerning material culture and contextual meanings. (2) It opens up a completely new way of presenting archaeological text and discussions.

The thesis works on various levels with *connections* such as: past and present, interpreter and interpreted, reader and text, single page and whole text. When exploring these themes it approaches some very interesting and important methodological dimensions. Personally, I view these dimensions as the most valuable contribution of Holtorf's CD thesis. If the thesis is put on a website that allows readers to add

their interpretations and comments, it will, at least in one sense, become a flexible, reflexive and "open-ended" discussion. In this sense Holtorf's *Monumental Past*, even if not explicitly claimed in the thesis by the author himself, is an important and interesting contribution to the methodological turn within postprocessualism. At the same time, it develops postprocessual theory and also puts this theory into practice.

It should be mentioned that at the moment Holtorf is searching for a publisher that will allow him to publish the thesis as a combination of book and a website. I hope he will succeed in this intention, since the thesis *Monumental Past* is highly interesting for more people than the limited number that have been lucky enough to get hold of a copy of the CD.

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