

Introduction

Paolo Fortis and Istvan Praet

At least since the 18th century, archaeology is a burgeoning academic endeavour. The efforts of its practitioners have resulted in an understanding of the human past that is infinitely richer, more acute and often more surprising than what was imaginable prior to its incipience. But what is sometimes forgotten is that archaeological research rarely, if ever, takes place in a vacuum. When ancient artefacts and the archaeologists that excavate them appear on the scene this always happens in specific places inhabited by specific people. Even though the latter are usually not professional archaeologists, they often have their own views of dealing with the distant past and its material remains. This volume gives pride of place to such ‘non-expert’ engagements with the ancient. More specifically, we focus on how Amerindian people in South and Central America conceive of the ‘archaeological encounter’. As will become clear in what follows, the past often appears as a dangerous territory in indigenous narratives; it is inhabited by powerful agencies that may influence the present. Such agencies can be hosted in ancient artefacts that people find in unexplored corners of their land.

These artefacts are often envisaged as the product of the creativity of enemies or, more generally, of outsiders. The skilful handling of such extraneous things enables people to cure, kill or foresee the future, among other things. Archaeological artefacts are thus 'alive' in indigenous life-worlds. Even though conceived of as pertaining to an alien world, they can activate relationships with different forms of alterity, which affect contemporary human beings. By investigating this 'living' quality of ancient things, this volume aims to enrich current debates at the interface between anthropology and archaeology.

On the basis of first-hand ethnographic research, the contributors to the volume not only investigate how Amerindians engage with historical artefacts but also how they envisage those exotic people who go through such great pains to study those old things, i.e. archaeologists. It will emerge that archaeologists are often regarded with suspicion, or even fear; indigenous people frequently have misgivings concerning their peculiar curiosity for the chthonic realm and their physical interaction with potsherds and other remains found in the undergrounds of their land. Yet, such doubts are usually brushed under the carpet as 'irrational'. A common thread running through all the investigations is the question why such indigenous conceptions of the ancient tend to be taken less seriously than the official accounts promoted by academic archaeology. Why is it, for example, that Amerindians always seem to end up at the wrong (or at least 'less exact') side of illustrious dualisms such as History/Myth or Science/Culture? Why

is it, on the other hand, that professional archaeologists have ended up as the only ones that are qualified to speak of a past that is supposed to be pictured ever more truthfully as the accumulation of historical/scientific data continues? In short, a central aim of this volume is to question the perhaps all too comfortable a priori division between the archaeological knowledge of academic experts and that of purported non-experts.

Archaeology is literally the ‘science of the ancient’. Etymologically, the term derives from the classical Greek notions *arkhaios*, ancient, and *logos*, reason. As a scientific field, its position in the current academic landscape is somewhat variable. In the so-called four-fields framework, prevalent in North-America, archaeology is subsumed under anthropology, while European universities tend to envisage it as a separate field altogether. Yet, there is a broad consensus that the archaeological discipline is built on a couple of fairly specific ideas and practices. Perhaps one of its most recognizable features is that it involves the excavation of artefacts and material remains from the past. The underlying aim is to elucidate the origins and historical trajectories of ancient human cultures and societies. The focus of attention is especially (but not exclusively) early human history or prehistory, that is, the period for which no written sources exist. This remarkable curiosity about the deep past goes back some time, at least to the medieval epoch; moreover, it was by no means limited to the European continent. For example, Muslim scholars at the Al-Azhar university of Cairo already attempted to decipher Egyptian

hieroglyphs and studied pre-Islamic antiquities and monuments in the 13th century. Flavio Biondo, an Italian renaissance scholar fascinated by the ruins of ancient Rome, is often hailed as one of Europe's first 'archaeologists'. Another commonly cited precursor is the Spanish Jesuit Josè de Acosta, who travelled in the Americas during the 16th century and wrote in exquisite detail about the traces left by the Inca, Aztec and other Amerindian civilizations in his famous treatise *Historia natural y moral de las Indias*. However, the institutionalization of archaeology as an academic discipline only dates from the 18th century, that is, from the period known as the Enlightenment. People such as Heinrich Schliemann - the excavator of Troy - and John Lloyd Stephens - who 'discovered' various important Maya sites - were instrumental for archaeology's consolidation as a 'veritable' science.

Archaeology's elevation to the status of a 'proper' science has had important consequences with regards to the way in which the past is viewed and dealt with at present. In a quite literal sense, the ancient past has become the privileged domain of a fairly limited group of professionals: only trained archaeologists and their scientific proxies are properly accredited to make pronouncements about it, only those who possess the appropriate digging and documenting skills are allowed to engage with it physically. Arguably, professional archaeologists have successfully delimited the distant past as a field of enquiry that falls under their sole authority. Or, to put this less strongly: it is widely accepted that only archaeologists can expertly deal with

all that pertains to ancient human cultures. That is not to say that non-archaeologists are so easily kept in line. Amateurs, hobbyists, local enthusiasts but also so-called indigenous people have their own conceptions of the past; this has been documented amply by contemporary anthropology (e.g. Gow 2001, Hill & Santos-Granero 2002, Whitehead 2003, Heckenberger 2005, Fausto & Heckenberger 2007).

One could say that the whole framework is premised on the 'great divide' between Us and Them, between those in the know (archaeologists and all those sensible enough to recognize their authority) and those who are out of the loop (amateurs, animists and all those stubborn enough to cling to their supposedly archaic cosmologies). In other words, it is based on an a priori separation between 'our history' (singular) and 'their myths' (plural). Arguably, this separation is just one instantiation of a wider dualistic framework often referred to, albeit in unsatisfactory general terms, as 'modernism' or the 'Western cosmology'. As various contemporary authors have pointed out (e.g. Descola 2005, Viveiros de Castro 2009), this framework is based on a seemingly ineluctable bifurcation between nature and culture, as well as between their concomitant '-isms': universalism and relativism, or naturalism and multiculturalism. In this scheme, archaeological truth and History with a capital 'H' overlap with the pole of nature, while the various supposedly distorted approximations of non-archaeologists and the myths of alleged non-moderns are isomorphic with the pole of multiple cultures. Alternatively, the bifurcation can be

expressed by means of familiar dichotomies such as trustworthy/dodgy, rational/primitive, Western/native, modern/traditional, professionalism/amateurism or - more specifically - academic archaeology/treasure seeking, scientific digging/grave plundering. Note that the activities of indigenous people and other purported non-experts tend to be seen as 'disturbing' by default.

A principal purpose of this volume is to question this prevalent idea of the non-expert as an unavoidable nuisance. In line with recent anthropological and archaeological research, it aims to probe in how far people without formal training in archaeology can constructively contribute to academic debates about bygone epochs. This contribution is not necessarily limited to what one can learn from myths, oral traditions and local accounts of the past; it also includes contemporary usages of ancient artefacts. The present volume intends to illustrate that such usages cannot be reduced to mere treasure hunting and/or illegal trafficking; in other words, they should not necessarily be seen as disturbances of a supposedly 'intact' past, waiting to be excavated and expertly described. A key premise of this book is that studying the ways in which ancient things are incorporated in present-day spheres of life is by no means superfluous but interesting in itself and may even add something of value to the archaeological endeavour as a whole.

Consider the use of archaeological artefacts by shamans and all kinds of ritual experts. Anthropologists have documented this remarkably consistent predilection for ancient things all over the world, albeit often only in

passing (see, for example, Claude Lévi-Strauss' classic work on the mythical and ritual connotations of pottery, *La Potière Jalouse*). In the Americas, the toolkit of shamans may consist of obsidian projectile points, flint axes, pre-Columbian figurines and pottery but also of fossil remains and bones of Pleistocene animals. Such artefacts are often conceived of as endowed with a specific 'potency' or 'power', just like those who manipulate them. The idea appears to be extremely widespread and is not necessarily restricted to what is conventionally classified as 'archaeological': living entities and specific features of the environment can also be imbued with such ancestral powers. For example, Chachi shamans of the Pacific coast of Esmeraldas (Ecuador) maintain that their paraphernalia of old potsherds, statuettes, aromatic herbs and polished rocks were originally made by *uyala*, powerful cannibals, while they themselves are often perceived as latently dangerous and are indeed sometimes referred to as 'man-eaters'. What is more, those who purposefully search for that kind of things are often envisaged in strikingly similar terms; Chachi people sometimes suspect latter-day archaeologists to be sorcerers keen on human flesh (Praet, this volume).

In scientific accounts such apprehensions of the ancient tend to be dismissed as irrational or, at least, not entirely trustworthy. Yet, the widespread character of such at first sight frivolous conceptions and their associated practices suggest that the shamanic usage of ancient things forms part of a longstanding tradition which may itself reveal something about the distant past.

To be sure, the issue is tricky: let it be clear that this book is not a surreptitious attempt to revive the now defunct idea that indigenous peoples, because of their presupposed inherent primitiveness, offer the investigator a privileged window on the past. In recent years, archaeologists and anthropologists have rightfully insisted that the argument that there exist people ‘without’ or ‘outside’ history is ethno-centric and, ultimately, unfounded. Our aim here is not to challenge this crucial insight. However, we do wonder in how far the appropriate worry of avoiding that intellectual trap has prevented contemporary researchers from developing an eye for age-old continuities in so-called indigenous societies. More generally, we wonder by which kind of intractable magic the Western cosmology, with its inbuilt bifurcation between nature and culture, between a singular history and multiple myths, between the archaeological truth of experts and the distorted approximations of non-experts, appears so self-evident. Ultimately, this volume is not so much about documenting ‘cultural constructions’ of the archaeological encounter as about questioning the very notion of such constructions and the more ‘fundamental’ reality it presupposes.

While most chapters focus on peoples of Greater Amazonia (including the tropical lowlands of Central America), one chapter deals with the Altaian people of Siberia. Ludek Broz’s account of the Altaians provides an interesting counterpoint to the ‘Amerindian’ papers, as it shows how a desired ancestral link is expressed through the contemporary creation of artefacts that

stylistically emulate objects found in archaeological sites. Broz shows that excavated remains are considered highly dangerous and therefore avoided by local people. The creation of replicas of ancient objects activates the relationship with contemporary people and their ancestors vis-à-vis the nation state. In the Amazonian context, the relationship with ancestors is often denied, or is projected onto the level of alterity; among Altaians it appears to materialize through a process of externalization of the creative agency of contemporary individuals. The chapters focusing on Amerindian peoples explore two paths. On the one hand they focus on present day practices through which people interact with objects that they conceive of as imbued with the power of immortal beings. This implies an adjustment of common understandings of what counts as 'archaeological', for it may also include such things as recently carved wooden statues and living trees, which some Amerindians envisage as ancient and/or ancestral. This is evidenced by the case of the Kuna people from Panama, who mediate their relationship with dangerous alterity by creating wooden artefacts imbued with similar powers to those once possessed by their ancestors (Fortis, this volume). In addition, it will emerge that objects acquired from foreigners and outsiders are considered powerful in a similar way as those made by ancient people. Spatial and temporal distance is a source of alterity and power (Helms 1979, Ventura i Oller, this volume). Objects and food kept in the houses of Trio people from Suriname bespeak of the network of relations that their owners have managed to establish

with past and present allies and are related to contemporary notions of personhood (Grotti, this volume). In a similar vein, the authenticity of objects found in the forest, or in museums, by the Ecuadorian Zápara, can be ascertained through dreams, which reveal them as people (Bilhaut, this volume). On the other hand, the chapters examine the narratives and the myths through which people account both for their own past and for that of those ‘others’ who created the objects they use in their everyday lives, often for protective and curative purposes. We are particularly interested in how such ideas and their usages inform the social values involved in the on-going creation of people’s lived world (Munn 1986). Put simply, the rationale is that what people do in the present says something about how they conceive of the past. When this ethnographic perspective is augmented with archaeological research, as Pirjo Virtanen’s chapter demonstrates, new light may be cast on the link between cosmology and history. Similarly, myths narrated by contemporary Piro people from Peruvian Amazonia reveal information about disappeared cities in the forest, which can be brought into alignment with archaeological material (Gow, this volume).

Given that most contributors are Amazonia specialists, we are particularly intrigued by the recurring observation that indigenous people in South America associate ancient artefacts with the outside – that is, with strangers, enemies or the dead. In Amazonian anthropology, it has become commonplace to say that Amerindians deliberately distance themselves from their

ancestors; kinship is rarely if ever conceived of in terms of lineages. A widely supported conclusion is that genealogical continuity between contemporary people and those who lived in their territories in the past is downplayed if not denied altogether (cf. Overing 1977, Taylor 1993). In fact, the dead are often considered as strangers and enemies (Carneiro da Cunha 1978). However, recent research has partly questioned this lack of generational continuity and the idea of the active distancing of the living from the dead (Chaumeil 2007, Heckenberger 2007). Furthermore, the appearance of new archaeological evidence suggests a higher complexity of ancient settlements in Amazonia than previously imagined (Heckenberger 2005). In line with these recent contributions we suggest that refining our understanding of the specific relationships that contemporary Amerindians entertain with those who used to dwell in their territories in the past may be very rewarding.

The present volume, which provides ethnographic perspectives on these various issues, is only a first step towards this goal. The papers that constitute it were presented at the 2009 ASA Conference held in Bristol ('Anthropological and Archaeological Imaginations: Past, Present and Future'). No doubt, much still remains to be done, but we hope that the ensuing chapters provide a good starting point to further the on-going dialogue between anthropologists and archaeologists interested in challenging received conceptions of the world's ancient past.

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