

HEIDEGGER AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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Under the title *Triumphal procession from the blind alley*, the German magazine *Der Spiegel* in the autumn of 1995 published a series of articles on the latest developments in the archaeology of *Homo sapiens* and its ancestors. These articles focus on mankind's evolution, and its relationship to the capacities of mankind's mind and culture. The question is posed: Did the prevailing circumstances force mankind to develop its mental abilities, or did evolution plant the seeds of culture in the brain of *Homo sapiens*? As soon as we hear a question like this, we have the suspicion that it rests on a shaky metaphysical foundation: the distinction between natural evolution on the one hand, and mind, culture, art, myth, religion, and language on the other.

What is surprising, however, is that the metaphysical distinction between the physical and the mental does not affect the information content of the articles in the least. In reading the articles, the *Gestalt* switch between nature and mind or culture is performed time and again, without incurring any philosophical problems. We are not surprised to hear that the excavation of a Neanderthal hyoid bone on the Israeli Kebara Heights allows us to ascribe language to the Neanderthals. By means of electronic microscopy, traces of horn or bone are detected on flint, allowing deductions concerning the development of human technology and culture; gas chromatography allows archaeologists to detect traces of wool fat on the floor of caves, giving indications of the use of textiles, and eventually of fashion, art, etc. Archaeology is the

paradigm of interdisciplinarity between those disciplines that were formerly distinguished as the natural and the cultural. The interdisciplinary character of archaeology shows the indifference of the obsolete metaphysical distinction between mind and matter.

Whereas the metaphysical problem of matter and mind vanishes in interdisciplinary archaeology, at the same time the *Der Spiegel* articles leave us behind in that bewilderment which surrounds every scientific investigation into our own origins. This bewilderment lies in the fact that in these investigations we are talking of the origins of our own speaking and way of living. In speaking of 'human cognitive evolution', we are gaining cognition into the basis of this same cognition. When we ascribe art to man who lived 35,000 years ago in the neighbourhood of the Chauvet cave, and add that cave-art is different from technology, we transpose our own distinction between science and art to the Upper Paleolithic. In a letter to the editor of *Der Spiegel* this unease is expressed clearly: the archaeological reconstruction of the origin of mankind is the act of Baron Münchhausen freeing himself from the morass by pulling on his own wig.

When I mentioned archaeology's interdisciplinary character, I omitted to add philosophy to the contributing disciplines. This is because the contribution of philosophy to the development of interdisciplinary science is questionable. It is even questionable whether it is the aim of philosophy to contribute to the progress of science. What, as a matter of fact, is the nature of the relation between archaeology and philosophy?

Julian Thomas' courageous book *Time, Culture and Identity* is composed of two sections. The first deals with philosophical issues, especially the archaeological consequences of the Cartesian metaphysics which distinguishes between *res extensa* and *res cogitans*, in the light of Heidegger's critique of this metaphysics, mainly with respect to space and time. Thomas shows that present-day archaeology is still bound to metaphysical constrictions where its subject matter, material culture, is at stake. The second section presents us with three case studies, centered around the Neolithic revolution in Europe, particularly in England.

The book is courageous, in so far as it opens up the gulf between philosophy and archaeology. Thomas has made tremendous efforts to move from archaeology to Heidegger's thought and back. In Thomas' modest words, he was caught in a movement back and forth. The abyss between philosophy and archaeology has become an abyss within Thomas himself, and is reflected in the two parts of his book. Thomas conceals this abyss in maintaining that his book is 'composed of two sections'. What does the term 'to compose' mean here? Is there any harmony, any concomitance, any kinship which allows us to make a composition of the separate areas of philosophy and archaeology (if indeed philosophy occupied an area – which it does not)? The abyss which is opened in and by Thomas is revealing. It is on this point that I concentrate my comments – not on academic philosophical criticism, like the question whether Thomas has acknowledged that time and space for Kant are not categories, or that Heidegger's *Being-in-the-world* has nothing to do with human practice.

A scientific discipline consists not only of amassing facts and explaining them in theories. At the same time it is reflective: it is constantly aware of problems of method (Heidegger: *Verfahren*), but also of the more fundamental problems of its ways of approaching its subject matter, the ways in which it opens up its area of investigation (Heidegger: *Vorgehen*). However, philosophical thought as inaugurated by Heidegger is neither methodology nor an enquiry

into the foundations of science. Does that mean that it is completely separated from archaeology?

What Thomas presents us with is an enquiry into the foundations of archaeology. For this enquiry he 'makes use' of Heidegger's thought. In Heidegger's words, Thomas criticizes the *Vorgehen* of traditional archaeology. Traditional archaeology has moved away from its own area of investigation. Material culture as the subject matter of archaeology is incomprehensible when the mental as immaterial thought and the physical as materiality are separated. Both for Childe's culture-historical archaeology and for Binford's processual archaeology the subject matter of archaeology is incomprehensible, in so far as they cling to this dualism. For Childe, material culture is emphatically mental and cultural, so the materiality of material culture is of little consequence. For Binford, on the other hand, the material things that are excavated are not themselves cultural. Culture, which is supposed to be the focus of archaeological investigations is imperceptible in principle. What is generally forgotten in archaeology is that the distinction between the mental and the physical itself is no timeless categorization, but part of our own history. So *time* is not just the subject matter of archaeology: archaeology itself belongs to history, and *culture* is not just the opposite of nature. This implies that human *identity* is not the identity of a subject: humans are already caught in the categories of time and culture before they exist as a subject.

Thomas makes use of philosophy in the interests of archaeology. What he observes is that archaeology, as the attempt to understand material culture, is unnecessarily limited because of its metaphysical inheritance. When the metaphysics of matter and mind is abandoned, it is possible to see that such simple acts as the disposal of rubbish, the building of shelters, or the making of a pot are meaningfully constituted, because in carrying them out agents deploy cultural categories, traditions, symbolic connotations and associations. The material world, as a world of traces, is inherently a world to-be-interpreted. In leaving the Cartesian opposition behind, the interdisciplinarity of archaeology may incorporate structuralism, hermeneutics and narrativism. Narrative archaeology is able to insert its own historicity into the archaeological investigation. Archaeology need no longer be confined to the technological understanding of technology. It loosens the shackles of systems theory and cybernetics in allowing for the thing or the trace as an interconnected web of historical meaning which is destroyed by analytic methods like spectroscopy, neutron activation analysis or petrological thin sectioning.

At this point we have to emphasize the tenacity of the distinction between the physical and the mental. It is easy to discard this opposition with a broad gesture. It is singularly difficult for us, inhabitants of the modern world, to live up to this gesture. What Thomas presents us with is an argument for interpretive prehistory. What Thomas maintains is that 'The fallacy of natural science is that it proceeds as if *uninterpreted* material phenomena were primary, and had interpretations added to them later.' This means that, whereas Thomas, like all representatives of modern hermeneutics, allows for a meaningful materiality, nevertheless he is bound to dualism where he opposes natural science to interpretation. That the methods of natural science are complemented with those of the *Geisteswissenschaften*, in the interest of the progress of archaeology, is understandable. However, Thomas is hampered by his dualism when he creates an opposition between science and hermeneutics, in maintaining that human orientation belongs to the world 'as it is understood *rather than* as it is revealed by empirical

science.' Sometimes this culminates in a futile revolt against scientific method, for example when Thomas says: 'Cutting a thing in half, probing it with X rays, revealing its atomic structure makes it all the less likely to reveal anything of earth.' Here Thomas's dualism itself is obsolete. The salient point is that in today's archaeology dualism is no longer a metaphysical problem, in so far as interdisciplinarity is the bridge over the gap between science and hermeneutics. As the *Der Spiegel* articles show, however, in so far as Thomas' archaeology aims at a combination of cultural interpretation and natural science, it reflects modern archaeology's practice, which belongs to the indifference of the complementarity of hermeneutics and science. This indifference, however, is an enigma for thought.

Heidegger's thought has nothing to do either with method or with the foundation of an area of investigation like archaeology. The archaeologist had better stay away from it. That is as it should be. Thomas points out, in the wake of Heidegger, that one should not hammer and contemplate one's hammer at the same time, to safeguard one's fingers. The task of the archaeologist, even of the reflective archaeologist, and that of the thinker can never be reconciled – as is revealed by the bipartite structure of Thomas' book. Is there any sense, then, for the archaeologist to pay attention to Heidegger?

It is the curious indifference of science and hermeneutics that opens up the unbridgeable fissure between archaeological investigation and Heidegger's thought. Heidegger points to that which lies at the root of the indifference of interdisciplinarity. Though natural science is exact and the *Geisteswissenschaften* are not exact but have their own strictness, science and hermeneutics are fundamentally the same, in that both aim at explanation. Whether explanation is causal or narrative or hermeneutical is of no importance, in so far as the aim of explanation is *familiarity*. Archaeological explanation reaches familiarity by *comparisons*, of periods, of artefacts, of cultures. Comparison implies applying a measure for comparing. Comparing is only possible then when such a measure can be applied, which implies that there should be a point of view from which differences can be calculated, either in numbers or by other means. The enhancement of familiarity is reached by calculating temporal and spatial differences, in applying a measure of comparison. The ideal is to reach an equality, a synchronism between today's research and its subject matter. The task of archaeology is to progress in synchronic familiarity with the material culture of the past, even when it points out that each recontextualization of material culture has to reckon with temporal differences implicit in the artefact. Thomas points out that the formation of human subjects is not a process that has taken the same form at all times in all places. The business of being a human being is conceptualized, experienced, managed, and lived through in radically different ways. This does not affect the explanatory and therefore equalizing character of archaeology. Thomas wishes to *avoid* inflicting the modernist conception of the individual on different societies by way of comparisons, e.g. the comparison of contemporary society with the creation of Big Men in New Ireland. Comparison is a method of discarding one's own prejudices in the interest of becoming familiar with the 'otherness' of different societies. Even when Thomas says, 'One aspect of archaeological analysis must therefore be the struggle to recognise the difference implicit in the artefact, in the face of the tendency to recognise it as something familiar', to recognize difference is to become familiar with difference, which still pertains to the calculating character of history and prehistory.

Heidegger's account of the nature of prehistory points to its fundamental will to be familiar, and thereby to be the contemporary of the past: 'Prehistory gives history its contemporary validity. The way man creates himself and calculates himself, the way he stages himself and compares himself, the way he copes with the past as background of his present, the way he blows up this present to an eternity, all this shows the rule of history.' (*Beiträge zur Philosophie, Gesamtausgabe*, 65.493; compare 147,151). When Heidegger emphasizes the will to be familiar with the past as the foundation of the archaeological enterprise, he does not intend to disqualify archaeology as a mode of investigation. What he points to is that the enterprise as such is an unrecognized struggle against a fundamental unfamiliarity, against a primeval estrangement. This estrangement is revealed for a moment in the fissure between the two parts of Thomas' book – which gives this book its meaning, a meaning that transcends archaeology.

This primeval estrangement is what springs to the eye in the *Der Spiegel* articles. In discussing our own origins we may be struck by the fact that we project our own familiar words into a past which will always reflect these projections. This is the basis of the success of archaeology. This means that a fundamental estrangement is excluded beforehand – until we are confronted with the circularity of projecting words into the origins of these same words.

A magnificent example of such a moment of estrangement can be found in Thomas' text. Thomas points to the specific character of *building* in the Neolithic. Building is a form of transformation, a means of dwelling, of abiding with things, etc. The longhouses of *Linearbandkeramik*, alongside the making of pots, stone tools, etc, 'represent only the most obvious case in which the Neolithic constitutes *building*'. Here we are suddenly confronted with the Neolithic nature of our own words: the word 'to constitute' is itself a word that belongs to the language of building, which, as a language, is itself the building of words. The terminology of building pervades Thomas' text, like any other archaeological text: building is its subject matter and at the same time its way of speaking, e.g. when Thomas speaks of the 'production' of places, of 'identity', when he speaks of a 'structure' of intelligibility, when he speaks of 'undertaking the labour of meaning-production', etc. This shows that our building of words, of language, of theories is itself Neolithic, and is reflected in our knowledge of the Neolithic. What we cannot know, save in sparse moments, is that we are keeping away the fundamental estrangement against which we have built our houses and theories since the Neolithic revolution. Around this estrangement is Thomas' courageous book composed.