

Paradoxes of Classical Archaeology

Johannes Siapkas

Classical archaeology is practised according to theoretical models formulated a century ago. The research goals of classical archaeology have been preserved as opposed to developed. This preservation can partly be explained by the ideologies that shape the discipline. In this article, some of the problems of classical archaeology are identified. Without giving any concrete solutions to the problems, the author argues that we need a profound discussion of the practice of classical archaeology in order to redefine and change the discipline.

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“Intellectual disciplines ... need this type of profound theoretical debate if they are going to remain intellectually alive.” (Dyson 1989:214)

A truism about scholarship in the humanities is that it rests fundamentally on discussion. This article is written in that spirit, as part of an ongoing discussion. For the sake of argument I have made some generalisations. To some extent scholarship is about simplification. In order to see structures, patterns, or whatever we choose to call them, we need to simplify. Hopefully I have not simplified too much. Some will perhaps agree with me, others will certainly not. I do not claim that this is the only representative description of classical archaeology. There are many descriptions.

First, some clarifications are necessary. I will mainly talk about the subdiscipline of classical archaeology in this text. Classical archaeology does not exist as a separate academic discipline. It co-exists with other types of studies that share the same object of study, namely classical antiquity. In the following there are two inherited tensions. I will discuss classical archaeology as if it only consists of social archaeology. Classical archaeology includes, however, a number of traditions such as the art historical, historical and philological (Andrén 1998). The description may therefore be too one-sided since I will primarily, not to say exclusively, discuss the archaeological tradition. There is furthermore a second tension in this text, namely between Swedish classical archaeology and classical archaeology in general. Classical archaeology in Sweden is primarily influenced by other classical archaeologies. Characteristics of classical archaeology in general may therefore also illustrate the practice of Swedish classical archaeology. The problems I point to are, however, not exclusive to Swedish classical archaeology.

In order to anticipate some of the critique I may get, I would also like to add the following. I am aware that the text is sweeping. There are two reasons for this. The first is that it was written under time-pressure, and the second is my position of dependency within classical archaeology. In an environment where we venerate previous scholarship, as opposed to questioning, I hesitate to point to any specific scholar, although that undermines my arguments.

PRACTICE OF CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

By far most of the scholarship in classical archaeology is still practised according to theoretical models that originated approximately a century ago, models formulated around the time when classical archaeology was institutionalised (Dyson 1998:284; Morris 2000:74). Classical archaeology is practised with the primary aim of recovering new material from classical antiquity. The artefacts are usually described according to typologies and correspondences, but are seldom placed in a narrative, or for that matter, interpreted (Morris 2000:52f). Classical archaeology has an implied accumulative aim. That is, we assume that the more material from classical antiquity we have available, the better is our knowledge of antiquity. Accordingly, we attribute the artefacts with an objective quality, a quality that we assume can be detected by studying the artefacts (Olsen 1997:85). As long as we describe the retrieved artefacts – construct typologies, analogies, and establish correspondences – we are contributing to the increased knowledge of antiquity, according to this view. This in turn legitimises, internally, our quest for new artefacts. To use a famous metaphor of archaeology, classical archaeology is about producing new pieces to the jigsaw puzzle. The problem of who is going to do the puzzle is seldom touched upon (Morris 2000:30f).

The descriptive mode of classical archaeology has also the effect of de-contextualising the artefacts. Publications of new archaeological material are done according to the arbitrary divisions of the objects, established according to supposedly neutral and objective criteria by previous scholars. These are divisions often originally constructed in order to establish an evolutionary and typological development (Andrén 1998:12). By publishing the artefacts in this way, we are re-affirming the sentiment that they, and not the human activities, are the primary object of classical archaeology. The single artefact is compared with other artefacts of the same category. The particular category is, however, seldom seen in relation to society. Due to the de-contextualisation, the artefacts are reduced. Stripped of their context the artefacts are surprisingly mute, the effect being that we are unable to write archaeological narratives (Shanks 1996:48f). We do not (re)construct the contexts of the artefacts once we have de-contextualised them. Instead, I would argue, our narratives of classical antiquity are based almost exclusively on the historical sources and not the artefacts (Morris 2000:41).

The objective of being a classical archaeologist, and the focus of the education, is accordingly placed on acquiring knowledge of previously retrieved and described artefacts. Producing new artefacts, through excavations, is also an important part of classical archaeology. The artefacts are, however, of secondary importance. The written accounts from classical antiquity are considered to be more valuable sources. A

considerable amount of time and energy is thus put into mastering the literary sources, including learning ancient Greek and Latin – although this is changing in Sweden due to administrative reasons. The artefacts are still mainly regarded as illustrations to the written sources. Furthermore, excavations and major problems of classical archaeology have initially been formulated through the ancient texts (Dyson 1993:201; Andrén 1998:17f). The dominance of the literary sources and the use of artefacts as illustrations to the texts is not a phenomenon exclusive to classical archaeology but applies to historical archaeologies in general (Andrén 1998).

Classical archaeology is dominated by the culture history model. It is mainly used to denote a model in prehistoric archaeology. Classical archaeology including a number of other traditions can not be defined *stricto sensu* as culture historical. But as a heuristic model I think it can be used to characterise classical archaeology. Features such as (un)formulated theoretical assumptions, naive empirism, idealism, and accumulative aim, are fundamental to both the culture history model and classical archaeology. Note, however, that I am not ruling out that classical archaeology originally might have had other aims and was inspired by other traditions. One aspect of the culture history model, shared by other models of scholarship under the wider positivistic umbrella, is the aim to produce one coherent narrative of classical antiquity. (I am using the terms positivism/-tic in a wide sense, not only to denote the archaeology practiced by New Archeology but also to include culture historical archaeology, although the latter is referred to as naive empirism and not positivism. They are fundamentally based on the same epistemology, albeit the difference in attitude towards the formulation of theories as explanatory models (cf. Olsen 1997:101).) In other words, the individual contributions are supposed to function as new complements to previous scholarship. That includes also contributions by scholars to topics of debate; the controversies are expected to be solved. At some point in the future we are supposed to agree on an objective solution and continue. Since the literary sources are given the primary role, we are neglecting the tensions between the archaeological material and the texts. Thus we are reinforcing the supremacy of the ancient texts and also continuing the practice of classical archaeology as primarily descriptive. The description of the artefacts is the end when it should be our means (Morris 2000:75; Dyson 1993:195).

Since our basic, implied, notion of practising classical archaeology is to recover new, objective facts, we fundamentally respect each other's publications as long as new facts are produced. That is, as long as other scholars are publishing new material we do not question their research (Dyson 1989:215). This complements the basic attitude of positivism and the implied research goals of classical archaeology formulated a century ago, when archaeology was given the role of illustrating and complementing the ancient texts. Classical archaeology is not about discussing problems but about describing ancient artefacts ranging from the masterpieces of Praxiteles to ceramic sherds of the Protogeometric period – although the latter were neglected for a long period since they did not meet the aesthetic values attributed to ancient artefacts (Morris 2000:112f; Andrén 1998:18).

INSTITUTIONALISATION OF CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The preservation, as opposed to development, of the major issues and models in classical archaeology can partly be explained by examining the history of the discipline. The institutionalisation of classical archaeology was due to a number of reasons. One important reason is found within classical philology. With the refinement of the philological methods during the 19th century, there was a need for better contexts of the texts. Classical archaeology was the discipline that was supposed to provide philology with these contexts. Both philology and classical antiquity had high status in Western societies around this time. Philology since, or maybe due to, Romanticism was regarded as the scientific discipline *par excellence*. The philological tradition can be traced back to the Renaissance, but it was revitalised and in a sense reformulated with German 19th-century *Bildung*. The ancient cultures, and perhaps in particular ancient Greece, were at the same time regarded as the aesthetic and moral model for Western society. They were also perceived as the cradle of Western civilisation at large (Andrén 1998:10-18, spec. 14; Morris 2000:37-76; for the Swedish institutionalisation in particular, see Scheffer 2000).

The ideologies of Western society were in a sense reflected in the institutionalisation of classical archaeology. In Sweden it was founded as a separate discipline – apart from philology – while in other countries it became part of the classics departments. Classical archaeology was separated from the archaeology that studied other periods and cultures. The main role of classical archaeology was to complement and illustrate other kinds of studies of classical antiquity, for example historical, art historical and philological such. In other words, classical archaeology was subordinate to the other subdisciplines studying classical antiquity. Considering the evolutionary bedrock of archaeology a century ago, it was only natural that the culture(s) placed at the peak of evolution also should be studied separately (Olsen 1997:33). Classical archaeology was institutionalised in a specific social and cultural context. In that context classical archaeology could legitimise itself through the recovery of new objects from antiquity. It fulfilled its role by contributing new exemplary artefacts. The more objects from antiquity that could be displayed and admired in the museums, the better. The artefacts provided Western nations with concrete links to antiquity, which further reinforced the notion of antiquity as the origin of Western civilisations. This web of ideas has begun to disintegrate since the Second World War (Morris 2000:72; Andrén 1998:20). In other words, the ideologies which initialised the institutionalisation of classical archaeology do not exist. But classical archaeology continues to be practised according to models constructed from ideologies a century ago. Due to the preservation of theories, and since the external ideologies have changed, I argue that classical archaeology today is inferior to archaeology.

PARADOXES OF CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

The practice of classical archaeology does, however, include a number of paradoxes. Some of the original aims of classical archaeology have, in my view, not been fulfilled. I believe it is this critique, more than any other, that positivistic scholarship should be

worried about, since the fundamental aim of positivistic scholarship is to reconstruct the objective history of classical antiquity. Although the discipline includes contradictions for the time being, the assumption is that they will be solved with the accumulation of new facts. Thus, if the minor aims that ultimately contribute to the final objective history are not being fulfilled, then positivistic scholarship has a serious problem. An illustration of this is the paradox of excavations. Recovering artefacts is a fundamental part of classical archaeology as well as other archaeologies. In fact, classical archaeology has recovered such a vast amount of artefacts that we sometimes claim that the quantity of artefacts is unique compared to other archaeologies (Dyson 1993:205). The publications from the excavations – and this applies mainly to large excavations, or “big digs” to use Dyson’s (1993) famous term – are usually catalogues. Parenthetically, Swedish classical archaeology has not carried out any big digs, but rather mini-big digs, for example Asine (cf. Scheffer 2000:198f & 200 fig. 5). They resemble in part the big dig tradition, but they are small compared to excavations like Olympia, Agora, and Delphi. One category of material is published by a participant in the excavation. This kind of publication – with a number of variations – composes the bulk of scholarly production in classical archaeology (Morris 2000:52). These volumes have two intended categories of audiences. Firstly, they are aimed at other classical archaeologists publishing the same or a similar category of material from other excavations. Secondly, they are intended to help the director of the excavation publish a synthesis of the site (Dyson 1995:41-45). But – and this is the paradox of excavations – the final syntheses are still waiting to be published. I suspect that one consequence is that the historians and philologists are not reading the publications. Accordingly, the contribution of classical archaeology, and a century of excavations, to the larger narrative of antiquity is not as big as we believe. There are, of course, exceptions; our understanding of the prehistorical periods is mainly based on the results of excavations. But our accounts of the historical periods of antiquity are still based on the ancient texts. To put it more bluntly, our understanding of the historical periods of antiquity has not been altered by classical archaeology. Our history of antiquity is still primarily based on the same literary sources as prior to the institutionalisation of classical archaeology. The archaeological artefacts are functioning as illustrations to details of the ancient texts.

Theoretical discussions within other disciplines are influencing classical archaeology to some extent. It is mainly one kind of theoretical discussion that we import, namely proposals for new field methods. Although slow to change, classical archaeology is willing to use new methods in the field, for example surveys, GIS, and various scientific analyses of soils and finds. In other words, as long as the results of the theoretical discussions have a methodological effect, classical archaeology is prepared to use them. But we do not formulate new methods, and neither do we participate in discussions that might result in new methods.

Archaeological theories and methods are mainly imported through the peripheries of classical archaeology, which applies to most historical archaeologies (Andrén 1998:120-26). It is archaeologists – mainly British and/or American – studying pre-

and proto-historical periods that have been most willing to discuss theoretical models, but they are also the few notable exceptions in classical archaeology (Andrén 1998:20-25; Morris 2000:73-76; Dyson 1989:219). These scholars have also expressed the most severe critique against the great tradition. They often refer to a group of French scholars inspired by anthropological research as another group that is willing to discuss new theories. I am aware of the nuances of the development of classical archaeology. The picture given here is rather crude and one-sided (cf. Morris 1999, spec. 31, who maintains that the monolithic assumptions of classical archaeology were shattered in the 1980s). But it applies to classical archaeology as practised in Sweden, and also to the whole of continental Europe. Swedish classical archaeology has a different institutionalisation from that of most other countries. The study of classical archaeology in Sweden includes all civilisations, except for ancient Egypt, in the wider Mediterranean basin, from the earliest traces of human activities to the end of the Western Roman Empire. In fact, a large part of the research within classical archaeology is actually done on prehistoric periods. Abroad, these periods are usually studied in other departments than classical archaeology. Swedish classical archaeology is thus on the institutional level bridging the “great divide” of Renfrew (1980). But on a scholarly level it is not. Instead it is influenced by the various traditions abroad and is reinforcing the divide between prehistoric and historic archaeology. The part of classical archaeology in Sweden that deals with prehistoric archaeology, mainly the Greek Bronze Age, is to some extent more willing to use new methods. Swedish archaeology, not classical but prehistoric, has been influenced by the theoretical debates in Britain and the US. Swedish archaeology has, furthermore, an animated theoretical discussion. And although one would expect it to influence classical archaeology in Sweden, so far it has not. We are primarily influenced by the development, or lack of it actually, in other classical archaeologies (Scheffer 2000:202). Administrative boundaries, however arbitrary they might seem, affect scholarly practice.

We are still practising classical archaeology as if there is such a thing as neutral and objective facts, assumptions that have been profoundly criticised in other humanistic disciplines. Practising the humanities in this way has been criticised for about 40 years now. The latest wave of criticism, post-modernism, is in some respects a return to idealism. The culture history model, on which classical archaeology is still based, has an idealistic foundation. One obvious danger, since we have not participated in the discussions but merely familiarised ourselves with the results, is that we might reinforce and return to previous agendas – using post-modernism to legitimise not only old questions but also obsolete models (Diaz-Andreu 1996:162f).

So where are the paradoxes? There are a couple of them. The implied aim of the positivistic tradition is to present an objective description of the object of study, in our case classical antiquity. This on account of a fundamental assumption that there exists a difference between the facts and the interpretations, which scholars should follow. We continue to practise classical archaeology according to this model and thus accept this assumption. The same, or a similar, model was – and perhaps still is – common to most humanistic disciplines. But it has been criticised in many other disciplines. By

all means, I do not claim that every other humanistic discipline except classical archaeology has had this discussion, but classical archaeology is one of them that has not. So we are continuing to practise classical archaeology according to a model that has been questioned, but we have not addressed the issues. The critique is ignored. To put it another way, the model is based fundamentally on the assumption that science is objective. The facts are independent of the scholars and the social contexts in which they are produced. The assumptions have been proven wrong – to use positivistic vocabulary for a moment – but we have not taken into account the consequences of that.

A second paradox is the fact that we do not have a theoretical discussion. My opinion is that theoretical discussion is one of the cornerstones of humanistic scholarship. Classical archaeology is thus lacking a fundamental part of what I include in a humanistic discipline. Through a theoretical discussion we define our practice. Not having such a discussion means that we do not define the practice of classical archaeology. In turn I believe this reinforces our way of practising classical archaeology, namely to follow the great tradition. One consequence of our lack of theoretical discussion is that we tend to import theoretical models late. That is, we import models after they already have been criticised in other disciplines, but we often neglect the critique raised against them in the core disciplines. A third paradox is that we move towards questions and problems that other disciplines are moving away from.

REFLECTIONS ON CLASSICAL ARCHAEOLOGY

So what is my point? To put it roughly, we need to fundamentally change the practice of classical archaeology. I do not take the naive position of New Archeology which believes that an explicit theoretical and methodological discussion will alter anything *per se*. But I do not see any other way. Our practice today is governed by implied theoretical models that include a number of paradoxes. The piling of facts is not science. Neither is the describing of artefacts science. Readings and questions of theoretical nature are not a high priority, and why should they be in an environment where the single most important line of argumentation is the piling of evidence, conviction by quantity?

I firmly believe that we need more theorising in classical archaeology, in other words critical reflection and discussion regarding our practice. A theoretical discussion that is strictly esoteric is futile in my view. Although I believe we need a theoretical discussion regarding our practice – formulated by us – I also think that it should be part of a wider discussion. That is, if we discuss our practice we will also participate in, and contribute to, a wider general discussion. Scholarship is shaped by the environment it is practised in. Both internal and external factors affect research. Therefore it is important to include in the discussion also the external ideologies that influenced, and influence, our practice. In short, we need to (re)formulate our basic epistemological assumptions.

I will not try to propose an -ism or one monolithic model, as I subscribe to the post-modernist critique of previous science as monolithic and fundamentally having onto-

logical aspirations of truth. However, that does not mean that I believe we should give up aspirations of truth, but rather realise that epistemic truth is produced and thus influenced by numerous factors. In proclaiming epistemic relativism I am not accepting every construction of the past as equal (Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997). The past is constructed in the present; it is not a passive entity that exists without our activities, we are interpreting and constructing the past, not unfolding it. That is, what we regard as facts are constructed as such by us. The theories and assumptions that govern our practice are in a sense determining what the facts are, and indeed what we regard as relevant questions of research. That is not to deny the independent existence of the objects we study as archaeologists. But the objects are not facts until we perceive them as such, to put it rather roughly. The past – the archaeological artefacts – is constraining our practice, so the construction of the past in the present should not be regarded as fictitious, but neither as an entity that exists regardless of our practice.

I realise that this suggestion might resemble a rough copy of a heyday post-modernist mid-80s manifesto – except for the references to various French philosophers of course – but classical archaeology needs to deal with these questions. Claims have been made lately that the post-modern wave is over. The abstract theorising and rhetoric of the 80s is perhaps over, but other aspects of the post-modernist critique are definitely here to stay – aspects such as ideology, agency, meaning, and not the least, self-critique. Although it may sound like it, I am not proposing that classical archaeology should take a post-modernist turn now; that would be anachronistic. I think that we need to debate our practice on our own terms. If that discussion is going to resemble the post-modernist turn or not is up to us. If it is, so be it. The alternative is to continue the great tradition, and that is not an option.

I also think that classical archaeology needs to write an archaeological history of the historical periods of classical antiquity. I realise that I am walking on a razor's edge here. And I firmly believe that the historical sources from antiquity are important categories of evidence, but we have neglected the fact that the historical sources are narratives. If we do not try to write an archaeological history, I believe that we will continue to practise classical archaeology according to the great tradition. We have excavated for a century now, and where are the archaeological narratives of the historical periods?

I furthermore believe that classical archaeology in Sweden can play an important role here. Due to the somewhat odd institutionalisation of Swedish classical archaeology, we are more familiar with the archaeological developments than some other classical archaeologists – a rather naive view perhaps. Let us take advantage of this peculiarity. But let us not fall into the trap of positivistic scholarship. I am not proclaiming that we should replace one aspiration of ontological truth with another. I am proclaiming that we should accept that there can be various, partly contradicting, accounts of the same phenomena. We disagree on contemporary events, so it is only natural to disagree on the picture of a past from which there are only fragments left. We do not need to reduce antiquity, and other pasts, to one narrative that we all agree on.

I do not claim that I have the answers to the problems I have pointed to. To be

honest, I do not know how the problem of the never-published syntheses is to be solved. Neither do I have any solution to the supremacy of the ancient texts. The problem of the lack of discussion or the acceptance of different interpretations of the material is a more subtle one. I suspect that it is connected with our epistemological assumptions. That is, as long as we can legitimise research solely by pointing to the fact that we produce new knowledge, I think that we are going to be haunted by this feature. Besides the desperate and abstract cry for more theorising, I would like to finish this article with some rough, concrete proposals. They could serve as a starting-point for a discussion and hopefully a change in our practice. There is an organisation called TAG, Theoretical Archaeology Group. One suggestion is to organise a Classical Archaeology TAG, a conference devoted to theoretical questions that is held on a regular basis. It could be restricted to Swedish classical archaeologists, or involve others as well. Why not organise it in association with the Nordic TAG meetings? Another suggestion is to sit down and formulate the fundamental issues, set an explicit agenda. Which issues do we view as the large, fundamental ones that should be pursued in our research, and which fields should be regarded as the major problems? Returning to a more abstract level, I would like to point to anthropology and some of the work that has been done there. Archaeology may have a profound theoretical discussion in comparison with classical archaeology, but my impression is that the discussion in anthropology is even more profound. I would like to end by pointing to the publications of Michael Herzfeld. I find them very stimulating. They are works we can look to for inspiration, not imitation.

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