

# The Archaeology of the Event

*The Past survives only in its relics, only in its inscriptions. Inscriptions are the expressions of what has happened. Inscriptions are written down, or they are committed to a memory made social and public, or they are caught in the shapes and forms of environments in buildings, in landscapes, in artifacts. The Past, when it survives, is phrased in some message. It is also encoded in its symbolic forms.*

(Denning, 1995: 53)

## 2.1. INTRODUCTION

Archaeology has been, and to some extent still is, seen as the study of the non-literate, prehistoric or ancient past through the study of material remains. Doubtless there are as many definitions of archaeology as there are archaeologists but the notion that archaeology is about very old things remains one of the most pervasive. Even within definitions that seek to be deliberately broad, it is surprising how often antiquity manages to sneak into the definition as this example demonstrates:

archaeology ... is the sum of studies bearing on material objects which may throw some light, in conjunction with other data, on the history and ways of life of *ancient* (my emphasis) peoples (specific events, daily activities, institutions, beliefs, etc.) (Gardin, 1980: 5).

This particular definition of archaeology was used, and described as “admirable”, by leading British maritime archaeologist Sean McGrail in his influential review paper “Maritime archaeology present and future” (McGrail, 1982a: 11). In many respects this preference for the ancient can be said to have typified significant parts of the archaeological establishment’s view of maritime archaeology, at least until relatively recent times. Needless to say, I believe that such definitions serve to erect artificial, and in some respects, false boundaries

between those times in the past having historic records or documentary sources (the historic past) and those which do not have them (the so-called “prehistoric” past). Fortunately appreciation has been growing that archaeology is not merely restricted to the study of the distant past and there has been a corresponding growth in historical archaeology.

Historical archaeology, or archaeology conducted in time periods for which we have historical records, uses documentary and other sources as well as material remains (e.g., Leone and Potter, 1988; Orser and Fagan, 1995; Orser, 1996; Funari et al., 1999; Tarlow and West, 1999). One of the basic premises of historical archaeology is that history, culture and objects are interconnected and the framework of historical archaeology allows the analysis of material objects in conjunction with different texts (D’Agostino, 1995: 116–136). This emphasis on texts and documents in historical archaeology has a variety of implications (e.g., Stone, 1988; Barber, 1994: 42–52; Zimmerman, 1995: 235–241). Mary Beaudry, for example, has emphasised the need to treat historical documents sensitively and to regard them as much more than corroborative evidence for the archaeological record (Beaudry, 1988: 43). People create documents; they are not neutral renderings—objective authorities—of previous times, and they are much more than simple lists or “true” records of what went on in the past.

By far the most widely available overview of historical archaeology in Australia is Graham Connah’s *The archaeology of Australia’s history*, formerly titled *Of the hut I builded* (Connah, 1993). Connah included maritime archaeology within his definition of historical archaeology, a position that I fully support. Connah also discussed some of the archaeological work done on Australian shipwrecks in terms of themes and groupings such as contact archaeology, exploration, colonization, convicts, mining and overseas trade. He included reference to the excavations of the Dutch shipwrecks in Western Australia, HMS *Pandora*, HMS *Sirius*, and *Sydney Cove*. Nevertheless, Connah paid little attention to detailed artifact studies and only made “passing reference to artifacts” (Lawrence, 1998: 9). This is a problem that Susan Lawrence goes on to suggest is symptomatic of a larger failure by historical archaeologists in Australia to properly address material culture analysis. Furthermore, this is seen as a significant issue in contemporary Australian historical and maritime archaeology and in this book I have deliberately drawn on detailed material culture analysis in developing my interpretations. These interpretations have also been guided by a recent body of work in Australian historical archaeology that has attempted to apply ideas about socio-economic status, “gentility” and “decency” to examine dwellings and living spaces (e.g., Karskens and Thorpe, 1992; Young, 1998; Lydon, 1995, 1996, 1999; Lawrence, 1992, 1993, 1994, 1995, 1998; Allison, 1998). Much of this work has been significantly informed by feminist perspectives and makes extensive use of Bourdieu’s concept of *habitus*, which Lawrence has defined as “the understanding of the behaviours and practices appropriate to one’s place in society” (Lawrence, 1998: 8).

## 2.2. ARCHAEOLOGY, ANTHROPOLOGY, AND HISTORY

One of the most enduring academic debates revolves around the nature of academic disciplines. Why do archaeologists, anthropologists or historians do what they do in the way that they do it (West, 1999: 1)? Why are there such divergent opinions about what are the “important” questions about the past and why should present generations be interested in these questions? Why are there “questions that count in historical archaeology”? (Deagan, 1988: 7–12; Honerkamp, 1988: 5–6).

On the one hand, there are those who seek to break down the artificial barriers erected between academic disciplines, while on the other, there are those who jealously guard the boundaries between the disciplines. Areas where disciplines overlap are often contested ground where sharp dividing lines are drawn in the academic sand. One such ongoing academic debate centres on the changing nature of the relationships between archaeology, anthropology and history (e.g., Binford, 1962; Dymond, 1974; Gibbon, 1984; Shanks and Tilley, 1987; Feinman, 1997: 367–377; Kepecs, 1997: 193–198; Ravn and Britton, 1997; Gosden, 1999).

For many years anthropology focussed on the study of human cultures other than our own and it has been suggested that “Modern anthropology has been, in a fundamental sense, about ‘other’ cultures” (Thomas, 1991: 3). In recent times anthropology has taken an expanded interest in modern, Western, industrialised cultures and archaeology has followed suit (Gould and Schiffer, 1981). We have also seen the emergence of historical anthropology that attempts to penetrate societies and cultures of our own, more recent past (e.g., Friedman, 1989: 247; Isaac, 1994; Denning, 1996).

In the USA archaeology has long been considered to be a sub-discipline of anthropology (e.g., Binford, 1962; Rathje and Schiffer, 1982; Spaulding, 1988; Kus, 1997). In the UK, on the other hand, there has been less of a direct link between archaeology and anthropology with more extensive contact between archaeology and history (e.g., Hodder, 1982a; Morris, 1997: 3–16; Gosden, 1999). Nevertheless, even in the UK, there has been increased interest in the use of methodological approaches like ethnoarchaeology for conducting “archaeological anthropology” (Hodder, 1982c: 210–212).

On the one hand, archaeology can be seen as being part of the wider discipline of anthropology or as a part of history or both. But it can also work the other way around where history can be viewed as a part of a larger and more encompassing archaeology (Little, 1992: 1). This kind of usage perhaps partly derives from the ideas of Michel Foucault who once wrote that his work “is not so much a history, in the traditional meaning of that word, as an archaeology” (Foucault, 1970: xxii). Foucault went on to define the “archaeological level” as “the level of what made it possible” (Foucault, 1970: 31).

The questioning and exploration of the relationship between history and archaeology has seen several archaeological journals devote special issues to the

topic during the 1990s such as the *World Archaeological Journal* (No. 7, 1996), *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* (Vol. 4, Nos 3/4, September 1997) and *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* Vol. 14, No. 1, 1997 (Ravn and Britton, 1997) as well as the appearance of new journals like the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*. The relationship between history and archaeology and the place of historical archaeology is widely considered to be an important topic for archaeology and archaeologists at the present time (Orser, 1996: 2). This book represents my own exploration of the relationships between archaeology, anthropology and history and contributes to the development of theory and methodology in both historical archaeology and maritime archaeology.

Historians have long been interested in aspects of the everyday life of people (e.g., Denning, 1980, 1992, 1995, 1996; Larkins, 1989) despite the often-repeated claims of some archaeologists that historians are only interested in great men and important events. Indeed, there has been an increased focus by historians on those who have variously been called “the common people”, “the labouring poor”, “the working classes”, “the people without history” and, perhaps somewhat insultingly, “the inarticulate” (e.g., Thompson, 1980; Laslett, 1983; Rule, 1986). The important part played by cultural historians and the French *Annales* School in focussing attention on “the common people” will be discussed later in this chapter.

In some respects this renewed interest by historians has led to a greater appreciation of the role that material culture has played in the lives of the majority of people. Incidentally, it has highlighted the potential that archaeology has to inform the present about the day-to-day lives of people in the past. The working classes, the labouring poor and the masses are frequently the people who have been largely ignored when “traditional” political, economic and administrative histories were written—those histories that were written by, or for, great men. Indeed the question of literacy, and therefore who recorded, represented or misrepresented history, is recognised as one of the problems in the writing of history. This has particularly been the case with the history of the last two centuries or so, which has focussed almost exclusively on history from written sources. This is a problem that has been clearly identified, and succinctly expressed, by Pulitzer Prize winning historian Rhys Isaac when he wrote that:

Historical understanding has too long been enthralled by the assumptions, preferences, and definitions of intellectuals—a high priesthood of which historians themselves form a part. In highly literate milieus the assumption is unquestioned that significant communication is conveyed by words, especially by written words, and above all by printed words (Isaac, 1982: 81).

One enduring debate in archaeology is the one that revolves around the idea of “archaeology as science” as opposed to archaeology as anything other than science (e.g., Melas, 1989; Shanks, 1992; Tilley, 1993). Rather than seeing this as

a negative, this book attempts to demonstrate that it is possible to employ scientific methodology and to use cultural generalisations that derive from an anthropological perspective to help to interpret particular historical events. This book also includes the quantification of certain evidence, but as I have written before “the application of quantitative analysis is limited by the type and source of the evidence being considered” (Staniforth, 1993a: 16).

Archaeology’s positivist fascination during the 1970s with the hypothetico-deductive model of scientific method has been severely critiqued and today it holds a less dominant position (Molino, 1992: 23). Perhaps as a result of my own background in science—the biology of the 1970s that was informed by Thomas Kuhn’s ideas about the paradigms of science—I am firmly of the opinion that, while archaeology can usefully employ certain scientific methodology and systematic recording techniques, archaeology is a humanity rather than a science. I acknowledge that this opinion has significantly influenced this book.

Another similar, and related, debate current in archaeology is that which looks at the epistemology or nature, limits and validity of knowledge within the discipline of archaeology. This examines the differing approaches to archaeology including “New” or processual archaeology, Marxist archaeology and post-processual archaeology as well as the defence of “traditional” archaeology (e.g., Binford, 1983; Preucel, 1991; McGuire, 1992). The commonly constructed binary opposition (or polarisation) between processual and post-processual archaeologists is a part of this debate. While inclined to take a post-processual stance on many of the issues argued in this book, this is not an extreme or relativist position. I believe that it is possible to know something about the past and that it is possible to gain a better understanding of the past through the rigorous and systematic analysis of different sources (see Chapter 4).

Archaeologists have been very interested in trade in a variety of pre-modern periods but historical archaeologists working in the modern period have shown far less interest in trade than they have in issues such as ethnicity, status and gender (e.g., Scott, 1994; Orser and Fagan, 1995: 199–235). One of the common claims is that economic activity has been well documented during recent centuries—that written records of shipping movements and detailed cargo lists are both available and comprehensive. I suggest that while the available documentary sources are sometimes extensive, they are frequently not comprehensive (see Chapter 3). Furthermore, I suggest that taking a cultural perspective to examine economic activity can often illuminate different aspects of the past.

Research on material culture from shipwrecks has the potential to contribute to our understandings of a wide range of issues within historical archaeology. Despite some excellent artifact catalogues being produced (e.g., Kenderdine, 1991; Stanbury, 1994) maritime archaeologists in Australia have generally failed to apply any kind of theoretically informed analysis of what amounts to a huge