

## **Archaeology and social sciences: introduction**

More than a decade has passed since archaeology first gained a level of autonomy as a discipline in France. Freed from the tutelage of history, but not having joined the departments of anthropology (as is often the case in the United States, for example), archaeology also benefited from a law which was favourable towards the rescue of heritage (development-led archaeology) and a growing interest among regional authorities. As a result, researchers and the various actors who align themselves with them, form a population which is larger than ever – without forgetting the added success of exhibitions and broadcasts dedicated to archaeology. At the interface of the human and natural sciences (with the deterioration of our ecosystems, environmental issues are topical as never before), this discipline has become a major producer of facts, divided into numerous sub-disciplines, each of which is developing the most advanced technologies.

Is this proliferation of methods and objects – we now speak, without provocation, of contemporary archaeology – accompanied by a questioning of its identity and a renewal of its theoretical ambitions? At first glance, it appears that a relative consensus has been formed in relation to a specific knowledge of material culture, due to its restriction to material things and the expertise which has been acquired for a long time in this field. In the Anglo-American world, aside from a few exceptions, the same perspectives were accepted thanks to the success of the works of Bruno Latour or Daniel Miller in the context of material studies. Manifestly, however, this has involved simple declarations of principle, without a precise examination of the cognitive procedures which are mobilised. Furthermore, the presentation of archaeology adapts to the grey area which exists between that which belongs to historiography, epistemology and the sociology of science, as well as a constant coming and going between descriptive and prescriptive aspects; to the extent that the precise description of what takes place finds itself constrained by what should take place.

In addition to internal theoretical difficulties, there is a rather unsatisfying reliance on external knowledge from the other social sciences. How many archaeological works, perfect in their precision, their systematicity and their use of the most sophisticated techniques, find themselves weakened by

reference to rearguard reasoning or overly hasty generalisations! However, if we imagine that archaeologists are perfectly informed about the most recent debates which enliven the social sciences (identity, ethnicity, gender, religiousness, agency, etc.), finally deigning to give them a little time, could they contribute to them in a meaningful way, beyond the “passive” production of well dated – but at times badly adjusted – facts? We all remember the fertile propositions of Leroi-Gourhan or Gardin, to name but a couple of French former colleagues. But was the first of these not above all an ethnologist? And the second, latterly, more focused on documentary and logicist approaches than archaeological ones?

Do the difficulties we have mentioned not come from a problematic adjustment between a methodology – or an epistemic position? – and the scope of the discipline? By way of analogy, who would think to make an entire discipline from the ‘comprehensive interview’, ignoring the observation of agents in action or the use of measurements of numbers of people? It is clear that archaeology strives for the status of discipline because many contexts can only be comprehended in this way: it would be a mistake to overlook that which represents over 90 % of human history and an equally large proportion of human practices spread across space and time, by partially filling in the gaps in the historical sources, when they exist. And while the archaeologist is forced to admit a level of powerlessness (in relation to the indeterminacy of identity, for example), he or she can at least benefit from certain probative criteria; because “a good excavation cannot lie”, which the consideration of written or oral accounts cannot guarantee. If one defines a science by its ability to prove, then archaeology is on solid ground. However, it appears that that which it ultimately seeks to demonstrate often requires reinforcement from concepts developed in other disciplines. What would the “archaeology of religion” be, for example, without taking into account the most recent conceptual approaches and the contributing observations of ethnologists? How would the expansion of the term come to “meet” the material things recovered by excavation? Without a doubt, we would at best have a few hints, but no certitudes, at times mistaken targets, or even underestimations; in total, a mediocre knowledge of religion in general...

The volume which follows is the result of a conference which took place at the TRACES research laboratory (UMR 5608 of the CNRS) in Toulouse, as part of celebrations for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS), to which it is linked. Within archaeology, and

despite the work of a number of people, we must be noted that this institution does not occupy a position of great importance. If we look closely, it is clear that many researchers make use, or made use, of archaeological facts in the context of a seminar or meetings. However, beyond a few contributions by Jean-Claude Gardin, archaeology has remained invisible in most of the epistemological debates which have taken place within the École<sup>1</sup>. This is surprising, as there is clear evidence that the “science of digging” constitutes an important laboratory for those wishing to examine the edges of the field of practice in social science, at the very least – in a Foucauldian gesture – to define them better. In any event, even though it may not have been a principal contributor, this institution, which supports interdisciplinarity in the social sciences, can be called upon to take a critical look at this scientific field. That is what we have begun to do here, by establishing questions for future research.

The conference (which took place on 17 and 18 September 2015) of course examined a number of major figures from this École: Jean-Claude Gardin, through the debate in which he opposed the sociologist Jean-Claude Passeron on the ever-important question of the naturalism of social science and the two scientific traditions (*S. Plutniak*); Jean-Marie Pesez, in his contribution to the concept of “material culture”, aimed not only at medieval studies, but at the whole of archaeology (*J.-M. Poisson*). The relationships between archaeology and other disciplines were discussed in various domains, without claiming to be exhaustive, and of course only mentioning those which were brought to publication (it is unfortunate that anthropology and linguistics, which were well represented during the conference – and rather emphatically so – are absent from this volume). History, first and foremost (and unsurprisingly), in the specific field of religious history, at the frontier of theology, where the same stratification of textual and artefactual objects is required in order to find a common ground for comparison (*C. Bonnet and F. Porzia*). Geography next, and the place which this discipline of space has by turns given to time; consequently, we can observe in archaeology an interrelation which finds itself formalised today in the very recent field of archaeogeography, which uses, for example, the concept of resilience, which is more productive than seeking an ideal synchrony (*S. Robert*). The economic approach, when it does not sufficiently take into account the specificities of “archaeological things” runs the risk of falling into the trap of uniformitarianism, for example by giving too much importance to the very contemporary criterion of growth, while other adjustments between questions and data seem more relevant (*C.*

*D'Ercole*). On an epistemological level, we know the extent to which Freudian psychoanalysis has made use of the archaeological metaphor to conceive its work of uncovering the unconscious, and how it fits into the evidential paradigm of the sciences, thus providing an understanding of the practice of inquiry (*F.-X. Fauvelle*). With a more philosophical argument, and a determined use of ontology – i.e. in an analytical way, of the entities which we acknowledge as having an existence, properties, and specific relationships – we can reflect more precisely on this distinctive inquiry, that which we can call “archaeological”, where human and natural things are built into a narrative, the latter being deduced from the former (*P. Boissinot*).

The observant reader will notice that diverse and sometimes unequivocal theoretical positions have been defended by the participants (and the final discussion, which we have not transposed here, was equally lively). This demonstrates both the dynamism of this field of research and the need for an even more in-depth clarification of the concepts, objects and methods, now that the issue of a hierarchical relationship between disciplines appears to be largely outdated. Do we believe that there is a place for this debate, at a time when social demand and political injunctions – also regarding scientific policies – call for increasing enchantment in relation to past things and increasing technoscience in their display.

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## Notes :

1. For an assessment of the archaeological studies carried out at the EHESS, aside from a few reports which have not yet been published, see Boissinot 2014 and Peséz 1996.

## Bibliographic references

**Boissinot P., 2014** - L'archéologie à l'EHESS : quels enjeux épistémologiques et institutionnels ?, *La Lettre* n° 73, juin (<http://lettre.ehess.fr/7739>).

**Peséz J.-M., 1996** - De l'archéologie et du vécu social, in Revel J., Wachtel N. (éd.), *Une école pour les sciences sociales*, Paris, Éditions du Cerf / Éditions de l'EHESS, 209-225.