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Quo vadis archaeologia?

Editor's introduction

The direction and velocity of scientific progress are difficult to predict. Nevertheless, reflecting on disciplinary changes and their consequences within and outside the discipline remains a constant task and responsibility of scientists. Archaeology, in the two hundred years of its history, has been seen in various different ways – as one of the humanities, a historical science, as part of anthropology or classics, as a social science and sometimes even as a natural science. Such views did not simply replace each other but frequently existed in parallel, competing with and complementing each other. In other words, archaeology was and still is somewhat elusive. It cannot be easily classified as a single type of science, as it transcended all these categories, even more so today.

What are the reasons for this elusiveness? Archaeology is about the people in the past, their existence and actions in every possible domain: subsistence, demography, settlement, social, cultural and symbolic worlds, behaviour, cognition and so on. These are broad concepts, but archaeology succeeded in developing authentic and operational combinations of theories, methods, interpretations and practices constituting authentic archaeological knowledge. However, what ultimately makes archaeology different from other sciences dealing with the human past are its sources – material remains and the consequences of human actions in all imaginable forms and appearances. Indeed, it is this material nature of archaeological sources that ultimately opens up archaeology's horizons to other disciplines. Archaeological sources come in many forms and contain a mass of information that other social or humanistic disciplines can hardly match. Archaeology has a very ambitious task – one may say overly ambitious – to interpret the past human worlds from as many perspectives as possible. However, these worlds are only open to archaeology in fragments, and remain distant and alien to our experiences and culture.

Can archaeology be explained with one general all-encompassing theory? After many decades of attempts to unify archaeology under one paradigm, we have realized that this endeavour is impossible and misleading. One general theory inevitably limits knowledge and monopolizes it. Here we have to agree with Feyerabend's famous claim that an anarchic state where scientific and other theories compete with each other is a much healthier situation than a paradigmatically unified and controlled discipline.



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It should be stressed that archaeology does not aim to reconstruct past human worlds but to interpret them for the present. Reconstruction is impossible because the past worlds are different and detached from our world. One may attempt to reconstruct some material aspects but not the authentic meaning of the past objects. Nevertheless, one can attempt to interpret them in our present, using our own tools, concepts, and categories. In doing this, archaeology reduces the original detachment from the past with a new original and creative attachment to it, which derives from our present motives and needs. So, asking *Quo vadis archaeologia?* is not just asking about the present epistemological boundaries of archaeology and how archaeology produces knowledge, but reiterates the fundamental questions of what kind of knowledge is produced, why and for whom. Answering these questions requires multiple perspectives and inevitably leads to unharmonized and conflicting views.

Equally important as discussing epistemological and theoretical issues is predicting the future of the archaeological discipline. The history of archaeology clearly demonstrates how archaeological knowledge and practice were deeply embedded in social, cultural, and ideological matrices, and how these structures influenced archaeology and its epistemology. Critical discussion and research on nationalism, racism, imperial and colonial attitudes, androcentrism, scientism, and capitalist neoliberalism in archaeology, were all first triggered by major societal changes and historical events. The feminist movement catalysed gender archaeology, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the wars in the former Yugoslavia and Caucasus in the 1990s triggered research on nationalism in archaeological knowledge, and civil rights movements empowered many local and indigenous communities to claim non-colonial views on their past. Archaeological engagement in this discourse made archaeology not just more robust in demonstrating its scientific and social relevance, but also greatly enriched its epistemological arsenal.

Greater interdisciplinarity is becoming one of the principal features of contemporary archaeology. Traditionally, interdisciplinarity in archaeology found its way first into research methods and techniques. The application of biological analyses of human, animal, and plant remains could be dated at least to the mid-19th century, and also the studies of environmental conditions associated with archaeological findings. Currently, IT and digital technologies for recording, analysing and presenting data have enabled a radical and global modernization of archaeology. Undeniably, all these achievements have profoundly affected archaeology and its ways of interpreting past humans and their worlds.

In recent decades, the greatest impact has come from natural and technological disciplines that have helped archaeology better understand the material side of the objects of research. This impact was so great that some scholars, e.g. Kristian Kristiansen, spoke of a third archaeological scientific revolution. He highlighted three principal

achievements: big data, the methodological power of quantification and modelling, and fundamentals for new theoretical frameworks (*“the wedding of agent-based materiality studies with quantitative analytical techniques”*) leading to new fields of knowledge in archaeology. However, one cannot easily predict where this new knowledge will lead us. It is very likely that we will expand past human worlds and see them in higher resolution. But will we also understand them better? We will see these worlds acting on different wavelengths simultaneously, making the overall image somewhat blurred. Applying methods from other sciences is not just a simple transfer of technical knowledge, but requires careful reconsideration and tuning within the archaeological theoretical frameworks. Indeed, it is here where today lies the true challenge for archaeology. If archaeology fails in doing this or takes the comfortable way by uncritically using the methods and results of the natural sciences, it would be brought dangerously closer to what it was once considered by many – an auxiliary discipline or a technique of obtaining additional data for other disciplines which claimed for themselves exclusive interpretative or explanatory capacities.

It requires interdisciplinarity beyond the domain of methods to ultimately unleash the potential of archaeology – the interdisciplinarity in the domains of research perspectives and interpretations. It is here where since the 1950s archaeologists have explored numerous philosophical, sociological, anthropological and psychological theories and aspects that gave life to new types of archaeological interpretations and knowledge. This may not be so visible at first sight, but it is firmly embedded in archaeological interpretations. The acting of both domains of interdisciplinarity is highly complex and ultimately dialectical. They are not separated, but also they are not fully tuned or simultaneous either, they act differently in practice and theory, but they, nevertheless, create new knowledge.

Applied archaeology is another domain that requires constant attention and reflection. By applied archaeology, we consider archaeological research and practice in different non-academic contexts where archaeological knowledge is essential in contributing to other types of knowledge, practices, and values, especially in the heritage protection and management domain. The bibliography from the 1980s onwards abundantly demonstrates how heritage became an arena of some of the most challenging social, cultural and political issues for archaeology in practice and theory, as if all the dilemmas of the modern world are meeting here. Heritage is always disputed and threatened by some groups of people. Developers frequently consider it an obstacle to their plans, some people do not identify with the content of heritage, and while governments accept legislation to protect heritage they frequently do not implement it effectively. For some, heritage has proper value only if successfully commercialized, and, last but not least, heritage, as the reified and canonized past and culture, has strong ideological potential. Once moved from the freedom of academia, applied archaeology faces all these challenges.

However, in the last few decades a gap emerged between academic, or better to say, research-motivated archaeology and applied archaeology. While the former was seen as a domain of “proper science”, the latter became increasingly considered a routinized practice or service. Coming to terms with two separate archaeologies is potentially one of the greatest mistakes archaeology could make. It could lead to a lack of academic research with regard to its direct social relevance, and it could diminish the importance of scientific progress in applied archaeology, again reducing its potential and role in society. Broadly speaking, in the last two decades more than 90% of all archaeological research in Europe and North America has been done in the context of preventive archaeology. This also means that roughly 90% of all new archaeological data in the last two decades comes from preventive projects. This fact opens a series of essential questions about the future of archaeology, which has become a prime example of a data-driven discipline, and this should be addressed in rethinking archaeology’s epistemology. Another issue is the quantity of the newly acquired data, which has no precedence in the past, and its heterogeneity. The last three decades have seen new situations develop, producing new circumstances and conditions for archaeological research.

Many of the questions above are addressed by the authors in this issue of *Ars & Humanitas*, which also celebrates 100 years of teaching archaeology at the University of Ljubljana. The selection of authors is not random, as the editor decided to focus on current reflective works of archaeologists from Slovenia and neighbouring countries which have a long tradition of close collaboration with the Department of Archaeology in Ljubljana, although unfortunately, not all those invited could contribute their works. Reflection inevitably invokes thinking about the future, and our “regional” reflection is primarily thinking about the future of archaeology as seen in this part of Europe.