Hannah Cobb · Oliver J. T. Harris
Cara Jones · Philip Richardson · *Editors*

Reconsidering Archaeological Fieldwork

Exploring On-Site Relationships Between Theory and Practice

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Chapter 1
Reconsidering Fieldwork, an Introduction: Confronting Tensions in Fieldwork and Theory

Hannah Cobb, Oliver J.T. Harris, Cara Jones, and Philip Richardson

Introduction

The boat returns to its noost providing a spectacular view of the croft. All is in order, ready for the coming winter, the peat is cut and the animals graze by the shore. The house stands on a small knoll overlooking the sea at Tobha Beag. A warm light flickers in one of its narrow windows and smoke drifts across the bay from its chimney. A stone outhouse lies within the well maintained vegetable plot and a lambing pen stands empty, awaiting the coming spring.

On the damp, October day, when two of the editors of this volume encountered the ruins of Tobha Beag on North Uist, Scotland, this is not what they saw. Yet the ruins of this building, as an empty shell, and an inert object, were not what they encountered either. Instead this rich narrative of Tobha Beag in the past that we paint here emerged from a complicated, multilayered experience of the site.

This volume examines the tensions that surround the subject/object dichotomy within archaeology, particularly between theory and practice. In recent times it has become increasingly fashionable to criticize attempts to produce archaeologies which rely on dichotomies to understand the past. Such approaches, which separate

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the social from the material and culture from nature, have rightly been accused of imposing a particularly modern way of looking at the world onto the past (Olsen 2010; Thomas 2004; Webmoor and Witmore 2008). Such an imposition prevents us from seeing how people and things in the past were mutually constitutive, rather than the former simply acting on mute materials to produce the latter. Within the dominant perspective that still relies on these dichotomies both the present and the past can be divided, in an uncomplicated manner, into active, thinking subjects (who possess agency) and unthinking, passive objects (who do not). This is a deeply debilitating perspective. For example, reanalysis of the modern world has shown that we do not *always* experience the world in terms of separated subjects and objects, and this has been supported by ethnographic studies that have revealed that other people divide the world up differently, and that subjectivity may emerge by different means (e.g. Ingold 2000; Vilaça 2005; Willerslev 2007). Furthermore, these studies have shown how the line between *who* is a subject and *what* is an object need not be hard and fast but rather negotiable, temporary and transient. 'Are *all* of the stones about us here alive? […] No! But *some* are' (Hallowell 1960: 24). This has led some archaeologists to develop new theoretical approaches that do not divide the world into subjects and objects but rather emphasize symmetry (e.g. Witmore 2007; Webmoor and Witmore 2008), relations (e.g. Conneller 2011) or animism (e.g. Alberti and Bray 2009).

The papers in this volume turn their attention to how the subject and object dichotomy plays out within fieldwork. In particular, at the heart of this volume is a central problem. Archaeological methods are explicitly designed to divide the world into objects and subjects. This may disguise the ways in which archaeologists and sites produce each other throughout the archaeological process (Yarrow 2003, 2008), but it is nevertheless a central procedure within our practices. Archaeological methods are explicitly aimed at distinguishing nature from culture, objects from subjects. Thus whilst we applaud theoretical approaches that seek to escape this bind, we cannot help but notice its continuing centrality to our practice. This then is a crucial conundrum: how can we resolve to approach the past in a non-dichotomous manner when our very methodologies act to produce such dichotomies? This is not a conundrum we aim to resolve in this volume – indeed it may not be resolvable. Instead the papers here examine various different aspects of the profession (CRM, academic and commercially driven excavations, historic and prehistoric archaeology, in the UK, Europe, Scandinavia and America) in order to profitably explore this question.

Subjects Versus Objects in Archaeology

It is important to begin this volume by briefly elucidating what we mean by subjects and objects. To do this let us return to the encounter of Tobha Beag (Fig. 1.1). This site was one of many recorded by The North Uist Project, a coastal erosion survey undertaken in 2006 by CFA Archaeology Ltd, and sponsored by the SCAPE Trust (Johnson et al. 2007). This project worked within a methodology set out by

Fig. 1.1 Map showing the location of North Uist on the west coast of Scotland, and the location of Tobha Beag (Produced with http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence/)

best practice guidance (for example English Heritage 2007) in order to assess, through field survey, what archaeological sites may be at risk within the tidal zone of North Uist.

Field survey can involve a range of different strategies but usually employs the same technique of walking, often in transects, across the study area, to seek out upstanding archaeology. This was the methodology employed by the North Uist Project. Consequently, upon the discovery of Tobha Beag, the archaeological processes employed were simple and standard. The baseline condition was recorded – measurements were made and these were noted along with a basic description of the site, photographs were taken, and finally an attempt was made to put the site within a chronological typology. In this traditional framework, the records are packed away until returning to the office where an interpretation is developed in relation to a wider landscape characterisation of the study area.

This is a familiar experience and one that can be seen as being entirely under-written by the subject/object dichotomy. In this example the archaeologist is the subject; finding the site, recording the ruins, charaterising the landscape. The site, and the archaeology, is the object of enquiry. The site is measured, described, photographed and interpreted, and when this is finished, when it is no longer the object of enquiry, it is abandoned, the survey moves on, rounding the next headland and descending into the next bay. This understanding of the dichotomies between active, interpreting subject, and the passive, studied, gazed upon object is ubiquitous

in western modernity as numerous scholars have pointed out. Furthermore these bifurcations have a complex relationship to enlightenment thought, where many were first explicitly codified.

As such this perspective is historically situated and there is no reason to assume that it is universal. It may be the case, as Miller (2005) claims, that people around the world today continue to divide things into subjects and objects, but this is not necessarily true for the societies that archaeologists uncover. As anthropologists like Ingold (2000) and Viveiros de Castro (1998) have shown, in other groups subjects are not clearly divisible from objects. Stones, rocks and mountains can be seen as having elements of subjectivity, of being alive. As Ingold (2000: 91) points out, it makes no sense to see this as examples of anthropomorphisation – people are not imputing human like qualities to stones. Rather it emerges from a world view where the lines between subject and object are not fixed and the aliveness of things is revealed in their actions.

Not only does any simple division of subject from object not capture the realities of life amongst other communities, nor does it in reality capture the complexities of archaeological fieldwork either. Our encounter with the archaeology is affective. As Yarrow argues:

> the material properties of the site act to modify the thoughts and actions of the people who excavate them. Just as the archaeologists created the objectivity of the things that were excavated, so the things that were excavated created the people excavating them as 'archaeologists'. Without the material engagement with features that occur in excavation, the people would not be made to think or act archaeologically.

> (Yarrow 2003: 71)

Thus a more considered examination of the craft of archaeology (*sensu* Shanks and McGuire 1996) reveals it is not simply a case of subjects uncovering objects, but rather subjects and objects emerging through mutually interlocking exchanges. Thus the archaeological method does not *reveal* a world divided into subjects and objects but rather *produces* one (Yarrow 2003: 67). Again as Yarrow (2003: 67) has pointed out, it is the very methods we use that allow archaeological objects and features to become visible by explicitly dividing off subjects from objects.

In the light of our earlier discussion of the particular and historical nature of this divide this is problematic. In dividing the world into subjects and objects we risk colonizing the past with a particular way of looking at the world that we can loosely term modern. Rather than building from the bottom up or tacking between theory and practice this perspective begins by imposing a particular way of looking at the world from above.

Archaeology as Modernity

This of course relates to the history of our method of study. Archaeology as a discipline emerged as one aspect of modernity, becoming ever more prevalent in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Trigger 2006; Thomas 2004). As it did so it developed a methodology that focused on recording the past in a way that unambiguously placed

the archaeologist in the role of the subject, and the materials that were recovered in the role of objects. These objects could be excavated, classified, measured, recorded, published and archived in what seemed like a relatively straightforward manner. As Lucas (2001) and Thomas (2004) have shown, the emergence of this tradition was not arbitrary but rather was part and parcel of the ways in which modernity began to divide up the world it saw around itself.

This is not a surprise, nor is it sufficient merely to recognize this tendency to divide the world up as a philosophical problem. As Miller (2005: 14) has pointed out, in the modern world it makes no sense to go around telling people (we might say archaeologists) that they are wrong: that the world is not divided into subjects and objects. This may be philosophically true, it may even reveal truths about people's engagements with things they did not realize before, but it does not stop people from doing it (Miller 2005: 14). Thus it may be the case as Ingold (2000) argues that the Ojibwa do not anthropomorphize their world because they do not begin by breaking it up in a dualistic fashion. However, when a western man or woman curses their computer for failing them they *do* believe they are imputing human characteristics to a non-human object, rather than revealing the ways in which this split is false. Dualities of subject and object may not be philosophically true but they are part of the realities of life in the modern world, as people understand it. Thus whilst we applaud Webmoor and Witmore's (2008) recent call not to try and bridge the divide between subject and object, but rather to undercut it, we question whether this is entirely plausible by itself within field practice. Indeed if we take Webmoor and Witmore's favorite theorist – Bruno Latour – seriously this is exactly the point he makes.

For Latour (1999) everything caught up in a network is capable of influencing it, of being an 'actant', in his terms. This applies equally to material tangible things, like keys, soil and microbes, to list a few of his favorites, but also to ideas, images and concepts (Harman 2009). From this perspective whether or not we believe subjects and objects make the best tools for describing the world, from a philosophical perspective, is not the point. Conventional bifurcations like subjects and objects are indeed, as Witmore argues 'the outcomes of relations with particular entities of the world and not the starting point' (2007: 549), but these outcomes are real nonetheless. What matters, ethnographically (*sensu* Edgeworth 2006), is that archaeological methods are designed to *create* this dichotomy: it is this that makes them real in the present, whether or not they existed in the past. The logical conclusion to the arguments put forward by Yarrow and others is this: that archaeology is itself the very process that divides the past into subjects and objects. By no means does this describe the totality of what archaeologists do, but it is an essential aspect of it nonetheless.

The Conundrum

This raises a difficulty, because not only does current archaeological field practice presume the split was true in the present, it also presumes the split was true in the past. Our methods, which divide the causes of a ditch being filled into either human

effort or natural silting, which divide worked from unworked stones, which presume that certain things are worth recording and others not, divides the world in countless ways in the present, and by implication in the past. Until recently such divisions were presumed to be unproblematic. As we have begun to wrestle with the problems inherent in such a dichotomous view of the world so we have begun to wrestle with consequences. This then returns us to the conundrum at the heart of this volume. Archaeological practice divides the world up in a way that directly imposes one set of views on to the past, yet archaeological practice itself only makes sense within that set of views. How then, can we deal with this?

One approach has been to deal with this difficulty 'after the fact', to view it as a problem for interpretation rather than one of practice. Thus plenty of archaeologists have in recent times set out the difficulty with dichotomous approaches to the past, and offered reinterpretations of sites which more or less successfully offer us new understandings (we too are guilty of this). Different authors have offered us the possibility of overcoming dichotomies through a counter-modern archaeology (Thomas 2004), through an escape from dialectics (Cochrane 2007), or through a symmetrical archaeology (Webmoor and Witmore 2008). A recent book edited by Russell (2006) is subtitled 'moving beyond modern approaches to archaeology'. Yet there is little detailed engagement with archaeological field practice.

Where it does come up – practice after all is Witmore's 'first matter of concern' (2007: 549) – the 'concern' is less with how we dig and record, but rather with *how we understand how we dig and record*. This applies equally to Yarrow's (2008) excellent discussion of context sheets. This seems to us to be problematic as it suggests that how a site is excavated does not matter. Witmore's strategy, that we should pay sufficient attention to the translations that take place through excavation and recording is excellent, and we entirely agree that much can be learned from this Latourian approach. However, we also believe wholeheartedly that how we actually dig and record really matters. This means that new strategies of recording in particular need to be developed (see the Ardnamurchan Transitions Project, this volume).

Far more troubling than this, however, are theoretical approaches that do not concern themselves with practice at all, which implicitly suggest that all can be fixed by correctly applying the appropriate theoretical balm, however defined, after the dirty work of excavation has been done. This in turn reduces the role of fieldwork to data collection (of objects) waiting for later interpretation (by subjects) (Lucas 2001). It seems strange to be so critical of modernist dichotomies in interpretation yet so content with their role in excavation. It also has political implications for how we view archaeological skill sets, privileging one level of interpretation and degrading another.

Let us be clear: we are not denigrating approaches to archaeology that have tried to move beyond modernist dichotomies, indeed we find them inspirational. What we want to draw attention to, however, is their comparative silence on the actual *practice* of archaeology itself and how this creates the very dichotomies we want to overcome. In many cases, of course, we can only interpret sites after they have been excavated, and from that point of view we have to apply our theories after the fact. However, the acknowledgement that interpretation takes place at the trowels edge

(Hodder 1997), or more accurately in the negotiations that take place around the trowel's edge (Yarrow 2003), means we cannot wash our hands of the way our excavations and wider field practices make certain choices and how these impinge on our interpretations. We are not suggesting that field practice can escape from the context it takes place in, but nor do we think it likely that theory can just smooth away these difficulties. Instead we need to face up to the inherent difficulties of this process, and tackle them head on. Let us consider this argument in practice by returning to our experiences on North Uist.

Subjects and Objects in Field Survey

To outline the traditional subject/object divide we have used our survey work at Tobha Beag on North Uist as an example. But in reality, field survey, and our experiences at Tobha Beag provide an excellent example of how the issues we outline above and the tensions they raise, were confronted.

Small crofts, such as Tobha Beag, are a common element of the landscape of North Uist. They usually consist of small plots of land worked by extended family groups. People keep sheep, work small horticultural plots and fish. They cut peat for fuel and build from locally quarried stone. A typical croft may consist of the family house, outbuildings, associated quarries and small cultivation plots, known as lazy beds. The particular croft at Tobha Beag contained a suite of multi-period remains (see Table 1.1) including a house built in the 1930s, when the land was enclosed, creating the current series of small crofts. The house it replaced stands to the north, marked by concrete and stone remains, while the stone wall remnants of the first house are discernible to the south. The remains of a sheiling (a shepherd's seasonal dwelling) are by the shore and field walls and boat noosts complete the picture.

This is how the site was recorded, each element taken individually and described. Each element was noted to be post-medieval in date and was recorded in such a way that the past was flattened. The multiple temporalities in its construction were reduced to a single generalising category. While recording this site a bemused crofter approached to observe the events and began to tell *his* story of the croft. He talked about the people, about the way the land was worked and how life was maintained in a small crofting community. What we recorded as stone built ruin, he saw as the village shop, reused as a chicken coup. For him, all the elements recorded *were* the croft; each element was part of daily life and none belonged to the past. He recognised that each structure was not contemporary and that some had replaced others or been reused, but the archaeological knowledge we were creating was not recognisable to him. It didn't make sense because of the manner in which subjective temporalities were reduced to objectified periods.

Within the field survey objects were split from subjects. These objects reflected particular concerns and methods, for example, to record all the sites we encountered within 100 m of the coast. However, it is in the tensions between subject and object that interesting archaeological knowledge is created. What may at first glance

Table 1.1 Showing the data collected at Tobha Beag

Feature	Original date	Archaeological classification	Current use
House	1930s	Post-medieval	House
Sheiling	Early twentieth century	Post-medieval	Animal pen
Corrugated iron house/shop	Early twentieth century	Post-medieval	Abandoned, originally a house, then shop prior to construction of Loch Portain road in 1960. Iron reused as roof of blackhouse
Stone blackhouse	Late nineteenth century	Post-medieval	Former house, now byre
Boundary wall	1930s	Post-medieval	Part of land divisions derived from 1930s crofting activity
Peat cuttings	Still in use	Post-medieval	
Lazy beds	Early twentieth century	Post-medieval	
Stone quarry	Multi-period	Post-medieval	Stone quarried for building of sheiling, blackhouse, boundary wall and field dykes
Three boat noosts	Multi-period	Post-medieval	One still used for fishing boat
Stone field dykes	Early twentieth century	Post-medieval	System of field divisions and animal enclosures

resemble a single event actually incorporates a palimpsest of multiple events and time scales. Traditional approaches usually focus on one particular period or temporality when they attempt to reconstruct past landscapes, thus in the present day our understandings of landscapes as a whole are often presented in a fragmented series of different periods, each separated from the other. In contrast the English Heritage Landscape Characterisation Project (Aldred 2002) suggests that landscapes are not a collection of fragmented, fossilised scenes of various periods but a *historical process* '[…] incorporating multiple temporalities which have different resonances in the present day' (Lucas 2005: 41). Such a characterisation sees the recognition of the multi-layered temporality of the past in wider archaeological frameworks. One account that takes up the issue of a multi-temporal present is Olivier's (2001) 'house'. This building, constructed towards the start of the twentieth century, lies in sight of a range of older structures dating back to the seventeenth century. Time here, for Olivier, becomes compressed as multiple different periods coalesce and impress upon the present.

Whilst Olivier's account draws out the problem with multi-temporality the result reflects the ways in which the features would have been recorded during field survey. However, in practice the different 'periods' described are actually *the* present for the people who live and work in such places (cf. Witmore 2006). The conditions of any present are never separated off for its inhabitants. Subjects and objects never truly part company, and this was explicitly demonstrated at Tobha Beag, where with the insights of the croft holder and the detailed analysis of the phasing of the structures we were able to record a rich history of one small part of

North Uist. Returning to our earlier discussion of Yarrow's work, archaeological method (in this case survey work), did not *reveal* a world divided into subjects and objects but rather *produced* one (Yarrow 2003: 67). In turn recording and incorporating another kind of knowledge (the crofter's) revealed a different type of history. Crucially, *both* these forms of knowledge are of essential importance in interpreting this site and its past.

A Return to the Conundrum

The field survey discussed here reveals in more detail the complex tensions within fieldwork that surround the production of subjects and objects and the manner in which historical experiences, in this case that of a local crofter, reveals other, more complex, realities. Is the crofter's view point truer than an archaeologist's? Not solely no, his history too is partial and incomplete, coupled with its own predetermined realities. Yet in recording his views alongside those of traditional archaeological methods alternative narratives can emerge.

How can we, in the absence of such eye-witness testimony, move beyond the simple dichotomies our very methodologies use to make the past visible to us? The answer we believe is not to call for the creation of some new methodology, one that would somehow free us from the creation of both objects and subjects through our work. How would the past ever be visible to us if we were not routinely willing to separate culture from nature and subject from object in the course of our practice? Instead we propose the need for strategies of *mitigation*, particularly in the manner in which we record what we find. The example of the field survey serves us well here: we need to find ways to record the crofter's memories as part of the archaeological process, to include forms of recording that trace and reveal the way in which archaeology divides up buildings and the consequences of us separating the past, flattening and hiding its differences. In part this could be seen as an argument for a wider implementation of Hodder's (2000) reflexive methodologies. Yet we would also suggest we need to go beyond that, to develop tools to allow us not merely to reflect on what we have done, but that captures the process as it unfurls, that is explicit about how and when decisions are taken that make particular kinds of past visible (see Ardnamurchan Transitions Project, this volume). We need to be more willing to think and record alternative possibilities in our practice, and these need to be implementable within real world budgetary constraints, which are getting ever tighter given the current global financial turmoil. The papers in this volume all provide examples of exactly this: real world means of exploring, recording and examining alternative possibilities and multiple pasts. This does not mean that they all agree, but rather they provide a range of diverse ways of examining the conundrum outlined here.

The first papers in this volume take a historical view of the development of archaeological practice. Carver, for instance, explores how the key principles of uniformitarianism, the three age system and evolutionary theory underlined the