

Archaeological Theory at the Edge(s)

Edited by Staša Babić and
Monika Milosavljević



UNIVERSITY OF BELGRADE
FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY

Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade | 2023



1838

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Belgrade 2023

Publisher
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade
Čika Ljubina 18–20, Beograd 11000, Srbija
www.f.bg.ac.rs

For the publisher
Danijel Sinani,
Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy

Reviewers
Aleksandar Palavestra
Rajna Šošić-Klindžić

Proofreader
Lucy Stevens

Cover art
Aleksandar Palavestra

Cover design by
Ivana Zoranović

Set by
Dosije studio, Belgrade

Printed by
Dosije studio, Belgrade

Print run
10

ISBN 978-86-6427-212-4

This research was supported by the University of Oxford project
“New Horizons for Science and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe”
funded by the John Templeton foundation. The opinions expressed in the publication
are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect
the view of the John Templeton Foundation.

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Staša Babić

Department of Archaeology
Faculty of Philosophy, University of Belgrade
sbabic@f.bg.ac.rs

ARCHAEOLOGICAL THEORY AT THE EDGE(S)

This collection presents nine papers dealing with some of the issues currently high on the agenda of theoretical archaeology, written by authors situated *at the edge* – in one of the academic communities usually regarded as (often unwilling) recipients rather than active participants in the debate. The authors are loosely gathered around the Centre for Theoretical Archaeology of the Department of Archaeology, University of Belgrade. This semi-formal group was founded in 2007 as a platform for discussion among teachers and students inclined to challenge the reluctance of the local professional community and to take a more active part in the dialogue on archaeological theory.¹ The volume is the product of the collaboration with the project *Sciences of the Origins*², which enabled us to reconsider our own discipline within the wider context of other research fields pursuing explanations of the deep past. This welcome synergy has underscored current archaeological concerns, at a moment when two seemingly contradictory paths are advocated with equal fervour, arguing that archaeology itself is at the edge of radical changes in its epistemic foundations.

Archaeology, as an academic discipline with a distinctive set of premises, was founded relatively late in comparison to other fields of inquiry into the human past, such as history, which boasts its ancestry as far back as Herodotus. This “order of origins” is one of the reasons why researchers into material remains of antiquity are frequently considered to be in a

1 During the 15 years of its activities, the Center has organized a series of round-table discussions, book presentations, and 10 annual conferences (<https://bg.academia.edu/CentarzateorijskuarheologijuCTA>).

2 The project is supported by the University of Oxford project *New Horizons for Science and Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*, and funded by the John Templeton Foundation (<https://sciorigin.weebly.com/>).

subordinate position in relation to those working with written evidence. Still, in spite of constant tensions, these two disciplines share many concerns and premises, frequently overlapping with other humanities, such as social anthropology and art history. On the other hand, since its very inception, archaeology has been closely linked to geology, both in terms of its conceptual framework and its practical methods of investigation, based very much on excavations and observations of soil layers. Consequently, the discipline has always incorporated a wide scope of knowledge, derived equally from humanities and exact sciences. Harmonizing such diverse sets of epistemic principles may be a complex task, and during the first half of the 20th century, archaeologists have sporadically discussed the particularities of the study of the past based upon material remains. However, during this *culture-historical* phase in the discipline's history, explicitly theoretical reflections were not remarkably frequent, which was one of the main sources for subsequent critiques. It was only in the 1960s when systematic considerations of archaeological theory were brought to the forefront and the first explicit research programme was formulated, demanding a rigorous scientific procedure purposefully built upon the assumptions of logical positivism. The debate generated by the advent of this *processual approach* has never been unanimously resolved, but only intensified during the 1980s, when its critics, gathered under the label of *post-processual archaeology* and inspired by diverse sources, argued for much closer ties with humanities. However, by the end of the 20th century, none of these approaches prevailed, and culture-historical, processual, and post-processual principles coexisted in the arena of archaeology, albeit not in the most harmonious manner. Furthermore, in the discipline's actual research practice, theoretical concerns have been largely neglected or transformed into a variety of eclectic research strategies. Even though no consensus was reached, the notion prevailed that the *theory wars* (Chapman and Wylie 2016) are over.

The apparent stalemate in the early 2000s solidified the tripartite scheme as the standard organizing principle of archaeological theories, according to which almost all current general overviews and textbooks on the subject have been structured. This heuristic model has indeed played an important role in archaeologists' efforts to think about the epistemic foundations of the discipline. However, presenting the developments in archaeological theory as a steady advance through clearly demarcated solid stages exaggerates the differences between the principles underpinning them, at the expense of a number of unifying elements binding archaeology into a distinct discipline throughout its history (Lucas 2012). The introduction of the concept of *paradigms* into archaeology in the sense pos-

tulated by Thomas Kuhn particularly stressed the tendency to observe the three “units” not as distinct research strategies, but also as distinct *phases of development*, in spite of the fact that a radical and all-encompassing shift in the epistemic foundations of the discipline never actually happened (Lucas 2016).

The corollary to this paradigm-driven approach to the history of archaeological theory is that massive and radical changes are to be expected in the field every twenty years or so. By the beginning of the 21st century, this somewhat unrealistic expectation produced a reverse response in the form of the announcement of *the death of theory* (Thomas 2015), implying that the discipline had reached the stage when its epistemic concerns could be put aside. On the other hand, the widespread introduction of data collecting and processing methods and techniques derived from hard sciences led to the proclamation of a *new scientific revolution* in archaeology (Kristiansen 2014), equal in scope and impact to the previous pivotal events of the 1960s and 1980s. Finally, inspired by a very diverse, sometimes even mutually contradictory string of inspirations from philosophy and social anthropology, a number of authors argue for an *ontological turn* in archaeology, moved by the profound critique of the entire previous epistemic foundations of the discipline (Olsen et al. 2012). Needless to say, none of these recent propositions succeeds in uniting the global archaeological community under the same banner, and the field remains fragmented.

This state of affairs may be extremely disquieting if it is presumed that all archaeologists everywhere need to comply with the same sequence of stages, as postulated by the customary tripartite scheme, now amended by recent developments. However, if we abandon the idea of directional progress of archaeological theory along a uniform trajectory, other outcomes are possible, based upon the premise that good epistemic norms are generated through *collective practices* of scientific communities, rather than abstract normative prescriptions (Fagan 2010, Longino 2002). The propensity of archaeology to assimilate and adapt a vast scope of ideas and solutions from various sources, astutely characterized as *methodological omnivory* (Currie 2018), need not be considered its shortcoming but as a result of its task – to generate knowledge about humans’ affairs based upon various forms of materiality – and its unique position at the crossroads of sciences and humanities. It may be argued that the periodically revived debate as to which of these research fields provides more suitable epistemic foundations for archaeology has not been resolved precisely because resolution is not possible, or indeed required. Embracing the role of the research field positioned *at the edge* of both of these strictly separated

arenas may bring *epistemic goods* for archaeology while also enabling it to take a more prominent part in interdisciplinary dialogue.

Finally, if archaeologists choose to meet the challenge of continuous refinement of disciplinary epistemic tools, it will also necessitate the re-consideration of multiple *standpoints* (Harding 1988, Wylie 2003) of its practitioners, based upon the premise that all knowledges, including disciplinary ones, are *situated* in certain circumstances (Haraway 1988). Therefore, voices *from the edges* of the mainstream – the parts of the global archaeological community now mainly relegated to the role of belated newcomers and passive recipients of ready-made solutions (Babić 2023), may offer fresh and challenging insights into current discussions on the future of archaeological theory. The present collection of papers is a modest contribution in this direction.

The authors were invited to assess the current state of the field from their respective areas of expertise and positions in the present landscape of archaeology. Their responses demonstrate their individual preferences for the interdisciplinary connections they consider most productive for their research purposes, from psychoanalysis (Teodorski – Ch. 1), to a rich repertoire of hard-science methods and techniques (Vuković, Marković, Sabanov – Ch. 8). Ivana Živaljević (Ch. 6) reveals the intricacies of those choices and the vast array of factors influencing the researcher's position in relation to a particular task. Selena Vitezović (Ch. 2) lays out an overview of multiple approaches to one of the crucial topics in archaeology throughout its history – Neolithisation. Ivan Vranić (Ch. 4) advocates an approach to Greek painted pottery that includes re-reading traditional interpretations in light of current propositions. Three chapters critically assess the most pronounced recent trends in archaeology: the *ontological turn* (Kuzmanović, Ch. 3, and Mihajlović, Ch. 5) and the emphasis on scientifically driven research (Matić, Ch. 7). Finally, the closing chapter (Cvjetičanin, Ch. 9) addresses the complex issue of communicating the archaeological knowledge to the public and the responsibility of professionals in heritage construction processes.

Our aim has not been to compile a definite overview of present-day archaeological theory. There are certainly many other topics and approaches in archaeology today that are not represented in this volume. The intention has been to exemplify some of the possible responses to ongoing discussions and to argue for a constant renegotiation of our theoretical premises, taking into account the diversity of human experiences and the materialities that accompany them.

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CIP – Каталогизација у публикацији –
Народна библиотека Србије, Београд
902:001.4/.9 (082)
165:902

ARCHAEOLOGICAL theory at the edge(s) [Elektonski izvor] / edited by Staša Babić and Monika Milosavljević. – Belgrade : University, Faculty of Philosophy, 2023 (Belgrade : Dosije studio). – 1 elektronski optički disk (CD-ROM) ; 12 cm. – (Edition Humans and society in times of crisis)

Sistemski zahtevi: Nisu navedeni. – Насл. са насловне стране документа. – Тираж 10.

ISBN 978-86-6427-212-4

- а) Археологија -- Епистемологија -- Зборници
- б) Археологија -- Методологија науке -- Зборници
- в) Теорија сазнања -- Зборници

COBISS.SR-ID 116649737

Since archaeological interpretation is still based primarily upon “common sense” or “accumulated knowledge,” rather than theoretically grounded premises, it is hard to overestimate the importance of the topics raised in this volume. It represents an important contribution to the current debate on the role of archaeological theory in the interdisciplinary context of research into the origins of humanity and culture and shows the direction that contemporary archaeology should take.

Rajna Šošić-Klindžić

The collection *Archaeological Theory at the Edge(s)* is truly at the cutting edge of 21st-century archaeological theory. The authors cover the vast scope of the most relevant epistemological issues in current archaeology but mainly challenge the worn-out cliché of archaeology as a dusty, colonial-born, antiquarian hobby. On the contrary, they convince that archaeology is vitally and virtually necessary for everyone today. Contributions in this volume restore the faith in the value of archaeology as a humanistic discipline, but also as a critical social action, nowadays when the World is once again faced with “the sinister lights of perverted science” (to paraphrase Churchill).

Aleksandar Palavestra

