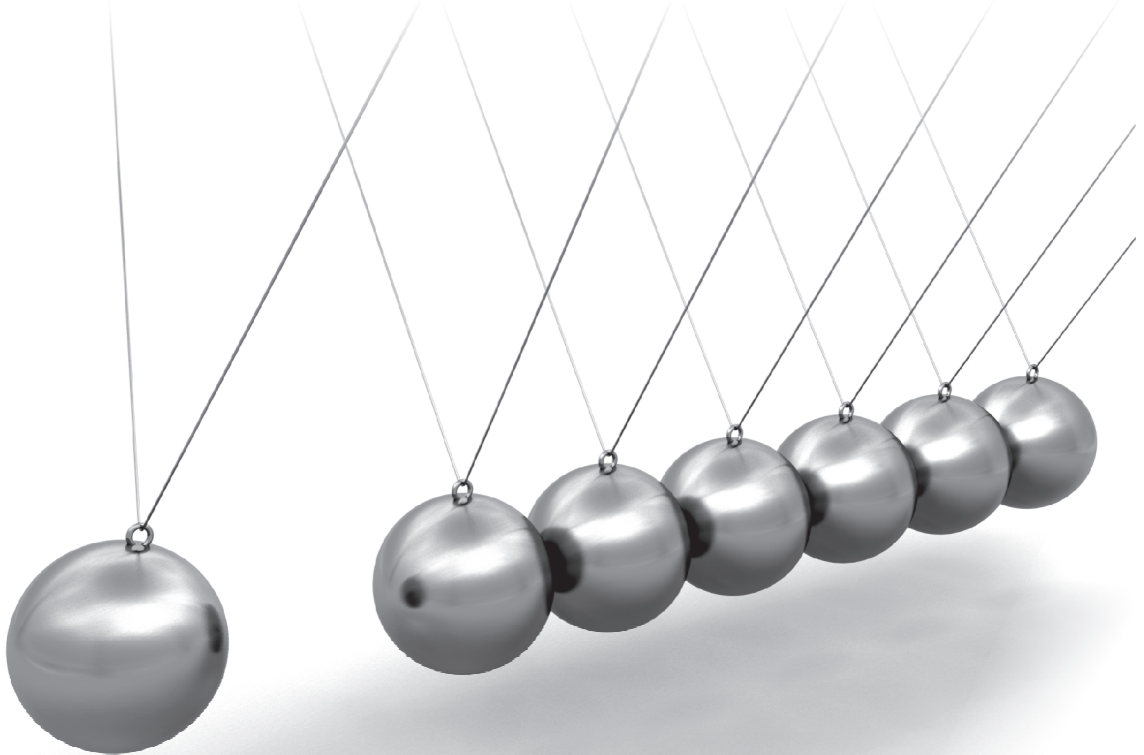


HUMANS AND SOCIETY IN TIMES OF CRISIS

Archaeology of Crisis

Edited by Staša Babić



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Archaeology (in Times) of Crisis

EDITOR'S NOTE

In December 2019, a previously unknown coronavirus was registered and the severe and potentially fatal illness it causes swiftly spread around the world. On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organisation declared a state of Public Health Emergency, followed by the declaration of a pandemic on March 11 of the same year.¹ More than a year later, while this volume is submitted for publication, the world is still struggling with a plethora of severe problems initiated by, but by no means reduced to, the medical aspects of the current crisis. The disturbances in the economic and social activities further induce profound distress in everyday lives around the globe. Depending on the current state of the epidemic curve, we are advised to observe more or less rigorous measures of caution, most of them limiting our movements and contacts. While maintaining distance in the real world, we are connected virtually, various technologies enabling us to compare experiences of restricted interactions. One can thus get a glimpse of the diverse ways in which people around the world make sense of their changed worlds. Many express their thoughts in words, but some use other means. Like, a photo series that invites us to choose and arrange objects that are essential to us under the current predicament.² The similarities in created assemblages (an assortment of face masks, hand sanitizers, laptop computers, comfort food, books...), as well as idiosyncratic objects reflecting particular lifestyles (dog leash, musical instruments...), illustrate eloquently what archaeologists know so well: our lives are framed in materialities that shape and are being shaped by our practices. Under the drastically changed circumstances, such as the ones we are currently enduring, our relationship with our material surroundings also changes, creating new possibilities and constraints to our practices. Our present experiences are not unique and throughout the history of our species, human groups have faced various crises, caused by a wide range of factors. From massive changes in their environment, population movements and violent conflicts, to profound shifts in attitudes, beliefs and value systems, these events have caused disruptions in everyday practices of communities and have invariably been reflected in some material form.

1 <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019>

2 <https://www.collater.al/en/paula-zuccotti-lockdown-essentials-photography/>

Bearing this in mind, the purpose of this collection is to investigate some of the instances of crises that afflicted past populations of the Central Balkans and adjacent regions, via the material traces accessible through archaeological investigation. The knowledge of the causes of disruptions and of the responses devised for overcoming them in the past may bring us closer to solutions applicable in our present. At the same time, the aim of the volume is to offer an insight into the vast range of approaches currently practiced by archaeologists, their possibilities and limitations, as well as synergies created in the domains of theoretical concepts and methodological procedures. The authors share the same working environment – the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, and specifically its Department of Archaeology – but follow diverse research paths, illustrating the current state of the discipline in general, its many theoretical and methodological ramifications. It is our hope that our specific disciplinary knowledge of the past may contribute to more efficient responses to crises in the present and future.

Belgrade, May/June 2021

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Staša Babić*

ARCHAEOLOGY (IN TIMES) OF CRISIS

*I complete my tasks, one by one
I remove my masks, when I am done*

One Fine Day, David Byrne & Brian Eno¹

While writing the texts collected in this volume, the authors have been living through an extraordinary experience, coping with everyday tasks made more complex by the crisis we have been facing, and creating new habits necessary to navigate the new environment. Our movements through public spaces have been subject to constantly changing regulations, announced in daily news. More often than not, we venture into these outings equipped by a new accessory – a face mask, constantly reminding us that our health is in danger. This protective gear comes in many forms, expressing our individual proclivities and tastes, and profoundly changing our perception of our own body, its surroundings, the social interactions we engage in, and the space we move through. This small piece of fabric has become a potent indicator of our present situation – the crisis caused by the pandemic (Schofield et al., 2021).

Although exceptional from our point of view, our present experience is far from unique, and the human history is replete with turbulent periods of crisis, profoundly disrupting the habitual order. These dramatic events, inevitably leaving material traces, have always commanded the special attention of archaeologists, and were often marked as turning points and demarcations between distinct periods of relative stability (Chapter 6, Gošić). Along with other fields of inquiry dealing with the past, a framework has been created and presented to the public, narrating the history of mankind as a continual path, interspersed with temporary setbacks – crises overcome by various means and strategies. From school textbooks

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1 <https://www.brainpickings.org/2020/05/14/one-fine-day-david-byrne-brooklyn-youth-chorus-national-sawdust/>

to mass media, this catalogue of past crises constitutes a set of cautionary tales, alerting to the dangers that may befall us again. At the same time, past achievements act as a repository of templates, successful solutions that may inspire subsequent solutions. The plague that killed Pericles, the Black Death of the 14th century, the Spanish flu – most of these past events have been vaguely familiar to us before the winter of 2019/2020, but since we have been witnessing the current spread of the virus around the globe, these episodes have become much more relevant to our own modern experience. The aim of this collection is therefore to investigate some of the situations of crisis in the past from the archaeological perspective, in a search for insights that may help us to better understand and cope with the present one. At the same time, the papers demonstrate some of the vast possibilities of archaeological investigation to contribute to our understanding of the world we live in, as well as of the past societies whose material traces we study. This final chapter therefore aims to highlight the versatility of approaches and the resulting potential of archaeology to contribute not only to an understanding of the past, but also of the present we live in, and the possibilities for future trajectories.

Identifying in the material record of the past a change induced by a drastic event of crisis may seem as a straightforward task. However, discerning archaeologically the manifestations and causes of a crisis, their interconnectedness, the scope of the change it induced, or the efficiency of the responding reactions, may require disentangling multiple strands of evidence, requiring diverse approaches. When balancing these diverse requirements, archaeologists often face the challenge of “working between the horns of a dilemma” (Chapman & Wylie, 2016, p. 15), generated by diverse properties of the material we work with. The very basic premise of our discipline is that some meaningful knowledge of the past can be produced by studying tangible evidence – objects produced and used by humans, or their impact on the environment. These material traces of the past are equally prone to observations founded in theories and methods of social and natural sciences, as well as humanities (Babić, 2015, 2018; Chapman & Wylie, 2016; Lucas, 2012).

For almost two centuries, archaeologists have been debating and refining their epistemic tools in order to strike the balance between these research strategies, occasionally embarking on bitter disputes (Babić, 2015). At least twice over the course of the history of the discipline, massive shifts in its basic premises have been announced, but to the present day an absolute consensus has not been reached across the archaeological community about one single unified method that should be observed. Rather, archaeologists have remained “methodological omnivores”

(Currie, 2018, pp. 25, 50, *passim*), adopting and adapting for their particular needs a diverse set of procedures, research strategies, as well as theoretical premises from various fields of inquiry, ranging from hard sciences to humanities. Consequently, material culture is observed in all its complexity, from its physical properties to its role in social and symbolic domains of human lives. However, this diversity of archaeological approaches does not imply that the field is not regulated by epistemic norms necessary to achieve relevant knowledge (Babić, 2015, 2018). Quite the contrary, in order to generate valid results and meet the responsibility we have as specialists, we are obliged to scrupulously lay out our theoretical and methodological premises, as well as the reasons guiding our particular choices. Disregarding this responsibility may lead to dangerous malpractice, blurring the line between academic research and pseudoscience, and ultimately undermining the trust of the general public in archaeologists' accounts of the past. This "crisis of confidence" in the discipline (Chapter 1, Palavestra) creates a public space where severe abuses might occur: even a cursory survey of the history of archaeology (cf. Díaz Andreu, 2007) demonstrates that ideologically laden narratives of the past have been readily appropriated by radical political movements and harnessed to buttress concrete actions with grave consequences, as famously illustrated by the case of Gustaf Kossinna (Bandović, 2012).

From the last decades of the 20th century, archaeologists around the world have worked hard to address this disciplinary baggage and to reconsider their role in the modern world. The recent surveys of the state of the field (Dawdy, 2009; Holtorf, 2009; Sabloff, 2009; Rosenzweig, 2020) emphasize the need to engage in contemporary problems and crises, and to make explicit the usefulness of relevant and responsible academic inquiry of the past for the present. Most illustrative is the example of climate change and human impact on the environment, encapsulated in the concept of Anthropocene, already attracting the attention of the archaeological community (e.g. Pétursdóttir, 2017; Solli et al., 2011). The complexity of the debate – whether a new geological term should be introduced to denote the period of the Earth history when humans have decisively influenced its state and, if so, when it started – brings forth the issues archaeologists have always been dealing with: the interconnectedness between our species' actions and the environment these actions are taking place in. Although the scientific estimates of the present imminent dangers are indeed alarming and unprecedented, humans have endured severe challenges of climate change on numerous occasions in the past. From the earliest Palaeolithic period, massive natural events, such as volcanic eruptions, influenced the climate and ecosystem over vast areas, compelling

human populations to change their subsistence strategies and settlement patterns (Chapter 2 – Dragosavac, Plavšić & Radović). Furthermore, even much less dramatic events, such as everyday activities of obtaining food and shelter and devising the most appropriate tool for the task (Chapter 3, Petrović), or local and/or seasonal environmental variations, observable during the Neolithic period (Chapter 5, Đuričić), required particular responses from human groups in order to overcome the resulting crisis. Social mechanisms, such as diversification, storage, and exchange, can be traced in the material record from the period, as well as the “hybridization” of technologies among different groups, indicating porous social boundaries between them (Chapter 4, Vuković). It is worth emphasizing that, from the onset of human history, times of crisis were overcome by various practices of cooperation and mutual aid among individuals and groups.

Making inferences about the social norms guiding the behavior of the past, especially when approaching human groups that did not leave any narrative account of their own affairs, has always been one of the theoretical and methodological challenges faced by archaeologists. The need to work on the base of information gathered solely from material traces emphasizes the importance of hard-science methods, but the rapid developments in branches of archaeology informed by natural sciences, such as archaeozoology (Chapter 14, Vuković), are obviously beneficent regardless of the timeline. The “methodological omnivory” advocated by Adrian Currie (2018) indeed enables archaeologists to build upon the results of various specialized analyses and broaden the knowledge of the past, by working in “trading zones” (Galison, 2010) and engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue. These exchanges may create tensions between diverse disciplinary claims (Babić, 2018, 116 f.), since harmonizing the epistemic norms of disparate research fields is indeed a difficult task, burdened with possibilities of misunderstandings and the mechanical adoption of simplified conclusions. However, the careful and attentive approach, not only to final results, but also to procedures and the particular logic of the disciplines involved in the interaction has resulted in many substantive advances (Chapman & Wylie 2016, 143 f.)

Archaeology’s rapport with the study of the past based upon written evidence has been one such complex interdisciplinary relation, often troubled with the notion that historical evidence must take precedence over insight based upon material traces of past events, considered to be far less accurate. However, the theoretical advances in the discipline of history have brought about reconsiderations of the narratives recorded in and of the past, and opened up the possibility to think about the mutual reinforce-

ment of archaeological and written evidence in a more dynamic way (cf. Babić, 2018, 63 f., 93 f.). Rather than to search for an absolutely unified reconstruction of the past, in which written sources are neatly supported by the archaeological record, it has been suggested that these two sets of data may relate to different segments of past realities. The archaeological record can convey information that habitually does not reach grand historical narratives, preserved in many texts, often linked to decisive turning points and crises that caused radical changes in the existing order. However, the ancient authors concentrated mainly upon exceptional events and individuals, while everyday activities of ordinary people in times of turmoil remained largely out of the scope of their accounts. Therefore, the Roman conquest (Chapter 8, Ljuština & Radišić), the introduction of Christianity into the Central Balkan lands (Chapter 11, Janković), or the collapse of the state economic and social order due to massive migrations during the Early Middle Ages (Chapter 13, Špehar), viewed through the lens of the materialization of these events, from simple ornaments or tools, to funerary practices, bring us closer to understanding the lived experiences and strategies to overcome crises. The points of disagreement between the interpretations based upon written and material evidence no longer need to be points of discontent, but rather opportunities for mutual reinforcement (Chapter 10, Vujović). The realities of human lives in times of crisis are never uniform for all. Diverse groups of a society perceive threats in various ways, face different obstacles, devise different strategies to overcome them, constrained and/or enabled by their particular position, and leave different records of their experiences in dire times. Some produce official narratives of the causes, effects, and outcomes of a crisis, some others are left to their own devices. All are potentially present in materialities of the moment, but their particular imprint may greatly vary (Kiddey, 2017). The insight into a particular situation based upon material evidence may thus diverge from testimonies framed in written record, not because one of them is more or less accurate than the other, but because they reflect different lived experiences, all equally valid for our understanding of the past (Babić, 2018, p. 93). Moreover, it may safely be claimed that intense crises of social and ideological order were occurring among the groups who never recorded their worldview in writing, but the changes they were experiencing must have been equally profound. In spite of the occasionally pessimistic assessments of the limits of archaeological inference, especially in the domain of ideas governing the social lives of humans (Chapman & Wylie 2016, p. 15), the discipline has made significant advances in this respect, more often than not entering yet another “trading zone” and exchanging knowledge with social anthropology (Chapter 7, Kuzmanović).

Furthermore, disciplines that do not habitually cooperate, such as classical studies and physical anthropology (Chapter 9, Krečković & Andrijašević), may find common grounds in the wider framework of archaeological inquiry, producing relevant results.

To conclude: by very virtue of its object of study, archaeology has been an interdisciplinary field of study from its very inception. Although it has been the source of tensions, both inside the discipline itself, and towards other areas of research, this plurality of possible tracks is increasingly understood as a source of epistemic optimism (Currie, 2018; see also Chapman & Wylie, 2016; Lucas, 2012). The potential of archaeology to bridge the divide between natural and social sciences, as well as humanities, makes it relevant not only in terms of the knowledge generated by its practitioners, but also in regard to wider epistemic debates (cf. Currie, 2018).

Finally, the huge diachronic scope covered by the discipline makes it possible to monitor different pasts and their dynamic interplays (Chapter 12, Milosavljević). While observing and disentangling the dense fabric of material traces of many past human actions, it may become tangible that our own experience is but one in the long series of overlapping and mutually shaping planes of past, present, and future (cf. Harrison, 2011). Crises have been a constant feature of human existence, ranging from the ones affecting huge numbers of people at the same time, to small-scale events, but nonetheless stressful for the individuals enduring them. The world that emerges after the turmoil is shaped by the choices people make while facing it. So, when we reach the point in which we have completed all the tasks put before us by the present crisis and take off our masks, the world we shall enter will be the one we have created by our responses to the global threat. The choices we make will be more prudent if informed by previous successes and failures. Archaeology can offer rich and varied insights both into the past and the present, enabling us to productively think of better futures.

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While writing the texts collected in this volume, the authors have been living through an extraordinary experience, coping with everyday tasks made more complex by the crisis we have been facing, and creating new habits necessary to navigate the new environment. Although exceptional from our point of view, our present experience is far from unique, and the human history is replete with turbulent periods of crisis, profoundly disrupting the habitual order.

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