

CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL STUDIES

THEORIES, METHODS AND PRACTICES IN ARCHAEOLOGY WINTER 2019

M A Course: M 21429 (Four Credits)

MPhil Course: P 21228 (Two credits)

Mode of Evaluation for MA: 2 Tutorials (2 credits) + End Semester Exam (2 credits)

Mode of Evaluation for MPhil: 2 Tutorials (1 credit) + End Semester Exam (1 credit)

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COURSE OUTLINE

Field Methods and Ethnoarchaeology

Antiquarianism/Early 'Archaeological' Endeavours and Culture-Historical Archaeology

Functionalism and Processual Archaeology

Structuralist and Marxist Perspectives in Archaeology

Postprocessual Archaeology

Community and Public Archaeology

Archaeology of the Contemporary Past

Archaeological Ethnography

OBJECTIVES

This course will introduce students to the theories, methods and practices that have developed within the discipline of archaeology. The students will be encouraged to think about the linkages between theory and practice and the changes that have occurred over a period of time. They will also be expected to engage with the myriad ways of approaching material cultures. The discussion on field methods will include surveys, excavations, mapping and site grids, sampling, stratigraphy, recording and collecting, handling and conservation, photography, human, botanical and faunal remains, and chronology. A particular research strategy that took center stage in the seventies, after the emergence of processual archaeology was ethno archaeology. The second theme will begin with an account of antiquarianism in Europe between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries. Histories of European archaeology assert that it was in the fifteenth century when the written record and oral traditions began to be supplemented by the study of material remains and thus began a new tradition, one that was different from historical scholarship. Antiquarianism involved collecting antiquities as well as describing old monuments. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries particularly, antiquarian researches were often part of the wider study of natural history and field surveys had a largely topographic frame. There was hardly any engagement with the material; the object "was merely there, attesting to an incomprehensible antiquity".

It was AHLF Pitt Rivers who towards the close of the nineteenth century first introduced detailed and systematic excavation and recording techniques in Britain. There were two key points that were regarded by him as crucial to archaeological fieldwork: a 'sufficient search' and 'careful recording'. The first archaeological field manual that was to come out was by Flinders

Petrie. Another major development that is central to archaeology was the introduction of typology/classification of archaeological objects. Further an excavated site was now presented visually through plans, sections and photographs as well as through text. These early excavation reports were basically framed around illustrations, with each portion of the text being a description of plates. A growing preoccupation with ethnicity encouraged the development of the concept of the archaeological culture and of the culture-historical approach to the study of prehistory. Gustaf Kossina first defined and applied such a concept for the interpretation of archaeological data in 1911. He declared “archaeology to be the most national of sciences” and went on to ascertain the original homeland of the Germans through archaeology. Nearly a decade later, V Gordon Childe also developed the concept of archaeological culture. The culture-historical approach with its emphasis on the prehistory of specific peoples provided a model for national archaeologies not only in Europe but also around the world.

The influence of social anthropologists and economic historians led to the development of the functionalist approach in archaeology. Increasingly there was a concern with relations between prehistoric cultures and their environments. As a result ecological and settlement archaeology emerged as major areas of research. Rather than focusing on the stylistic analysis of artefacts, archaeologists now began to use their data to study changes in subsistence economies, population size and settlement pattern. To some extent the growing interest in ecology and settlement patterns was seen as evidence of a new concern within archaeology. The primary aim, it was felt was to explain changes in archaeological cultures in terms of cultural processes. There was a stress on a scientific approach and at the same time a distancing from history, especially in American archaeology. The rigorous application of a positivist approach was seen as eliminating subjective elements and establishing a basis for an objective, scientific interpretation of archaeological data. A considerable body of literature now exists in which some form of structural analysis has been used in archaeological studies. Attempts have been made to recover underlying principles that can be shown to generate pottery design structure, sequences of mortuary practices, relationship between distinctive attributes of material-culture patterning in settlement and burials. Archaeologists influenced by Marxism have worked on questions of ideology, legitimation of power and social change.

Postprocessual archaeology emerged in the early eighties as a result of dissatisfaction with processual archaeology. Postprocessualists rejected the positivist view of science. Interpretation in archaeology, it is argued, is always hermeneutic, and entails assigning those meanings to archaeological objects that were also in the minds of the ancient people who made and used them. Unlike processual archaeology, where the individual did not figure, postprocessualists regard the individual as being active. Material culture is like a text and just as a text is open to multiple interpretations, so is archaeological data. While the social in archaeology may have begun with Childe, it has now assumed much more of a centrality. Archaeology, like other social sciences, has also tried to address the notion of identity. In archaeological fieldwork too, a reflexive approach has been adopted. The idea that one can just describe and record without interpretation is no longer regarded as tenable. Four components of a reflexive approach have been defined and include reflexive, contextual, interactive and multivocal. There has also emerged in recent years a critique of the existing literature on the subject of classification. The textual practice in archaeology has undergone a change with the replacement of field notebooks with context sheets. The relationship between text and image in excavation reports is also changing. At the same time, there has been a critique of postprocessualism, too, in the last two decades.

New areas of research such as gender, childhood and sexuality have opened up. There is also now the emergence of community and public archaeologies. Since the last two decades, a number of archaeologists from different theoretical positions have been writing that archaeology can deal not just with the past but equally with present things that are in use. In fact, in response to this emerging sub-discipline, the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* was founded in 2013. Similarly, ethnoarchaeology is now viewed as one of the ancestral fields of archaeological ethnography. It is being argued that more than a practice and a method, this newly emerging field of archaeological ethnography inhabits a transdisciplinary and transcultural space. The methods which are still being shaped seem to draw on both archaeological as well as anthropological practices.

Essential Readings

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