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Is the Past ‘Knowable’ or is its Study just ‘Do-able’

One and a half million witnesses from nowhere in particular have something to contribute...

Rede uitgesproken door

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bij de aanvaarding van het ambt van hoogleraar
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aan de Universiteit Leiden
gehouden op 6 oktober 2000.

Mijnheer de Rector Magnificus, zeer gewaardeerde toehoorders,...
it has been a tremendous honour to have been appointed as Professor of Classical Archaeology at the great university of Leiden, and I thank all those whose enthusiasm for bringing me to the Netherlands is responsible for my presence with you today. I am very fortunate to have a bright and stimulating group of research students, and sitting with them some of the many colleagues from non-Classical Archaeology with whom I already have excellent mutual research interests.

The title of my Oration this afternoon is this:

“Is the Past ‘Knowable’ or is its Study just ‘Do-able’? One and a half million witnesses from nowhere in particular have something to contribute...”

Archaeology is the study of past material culture and officially, at least, it exists and is widely funded because a better understanding of the past is argued to have value in the present, and indeed could help us plan a better future. However, if we take away the elements of entertainment and sheer curiosity which make most people fascinated by re-enactments or virtual reality reconstructions of exotic past peoples, and ask more seriously whether Archaeological results are regularly employed to make us rethink our own lives or help planners to make novel decisions, most archaeologists will quickly admit that our work does not change nor will change contemporary society.

That is not to say that society has not regularly dipped into archaeological literature to very selectively pull out bits of information to suit certain agendas - 19th century nationalists and 20th century totalitarian states provide a continuous story of the abuse of archaeological publications to provide supposed scientific support for already-elaborated political agendas. The prehistorian Jacquetta Hawkes wittily remarked: “Every age gets the Stonehenge it desires, or deserves”.

Moreover, archaeologists have always tried to make themselves relevant by seizing the latest social trend in the hope of finding some reflection in the past, so that they might make some vital contribution to modern life. Current preoccupations in the more theoretical sectors of Archaeology are focussed, for example, on Gender, Cultural Identity and Individualism - hardly surprising in an age when we are rethinking the role of Women, restructuring the Western Cultural tradition into Multi-Culturalism, and find ourselves subtly remoulded by the propaganda of Post-Fordist global capitalism into believing that we are isolated, atomistic entrepreneurs rather than co-operative social animals.

As you can gather, I am pretty sceptical about the track-record of the discipline of Archaeology when it comes to changing the present or the future. By now you might be wondering if this Inaugural Lecture is going to be a public requiem rather than a celebration of the subject! Thankfully, I hope by the conclusion of this Oration to have given you grounds for optimism, but only through a radical reinterpretation of what archaeologists can do - and in the process raising doubts whether during the 30 or so years of my academic career there hasn't been too much thinking in Archaeology.

That is a cue to take you back to the time I began to study the subject, in the late 1960s. This was a very exciting moment in the development of the discipline, because revolutionaries such as the American Lewis Binford (earlier this year awarded an honorary doctorate at Leiden) and my own teacher David Clarke, were creating the so-called New Archaeology: the discipline was going to become a hard science, and discover the underlying general laws that govern the development of human society in all times and places. With such a programme, other academic communities (especially those highly-regarded physicists) and the general public, would have to take notice of the results of archaeological research! But it is now clear that Archaeology once again was merely reflecting society - here the postwar confidence in science, technology and social planning that typified the West up until the 1970s.

The lofty aims of formulating what Binford called 'The Laws of Cultural Process' and the parallel goals of Clarke to see how far the human past could be reduced to a series of mathematical equations, proved illusory. By the early 1980s archaeological thinkers were in any case becoming enamoured of the very different intellectual movement called Post-Modernism. Amongst other things, this tradition casts heavy doubt on the credentials of science to find facts or truth, especially where it concerns human behaviour, preferring to redirect our sympathies into the Humanities, and our academic goals into the creation of literary texts. History as a kind of imaginative novel-writing reflecting the autobiography of its contemporary author should replace the archive-researcher claiming to compile statistics which will eventually add up to a full picture of the past.

Here we find ourselves in a strange situation: if all attempts to write summary stories about the past by archaeologists are essentially expressionist statements of modern-day individuals with their contemporary biases and concerns, then what do all the bits of evidence that we dig up or record mean? As the historian Kuzminski humorously commented, in the Post-Modern or to use the archaeological version, Post-Processual, view, our empirical data from the past, cut loose from the possibility of reliable interpretation as factual history, become merely "one damn thing after another". Archaeology is therefore not about finding the 'truth' but to quote a leading Post-Processualist, it is a form of 'cultural product'.

We seem between the 1950s and the current new millennium to have passed from what was called 'Traditional Archaeology', a kind of Archaeology concentrating on action, digging and putting back houses and people doing everyday things, into the 1960s New Archaeology with its emphasis on thinking about how all these things ought to be done, then on into Post-Modern Archaeology where we think about how we think about everything - more a kind of philosophy of life and textual criticism of archaeological writings than an attempt to convey the key trends of a past reality.

But this story I have related is about academic archaeology and mainly in Western Europe and parts of North America. Moreover, to put it into context, David Harvey in his masterly deconstruction of Post-Modernism has demonstrated to my satisfaction that this intellectual movement is essentially an unthinking reflection of the ethos and practices of Late Capitalism. Once more Archaeological ideas are the froth of the age!

What you might ask, has the general public made of the rapid conversion of History and Archaeology into fiction and self-expression? What about the state archaeologists and heritage managers whose job is to convince funders that the Past is worth saving because it tells us something about our ancestors rather than ourselves? Actually, the public are unaware of the existence of Post-Modern Archaeology, and the offices and field huts of professional public archaeologists are not the places where are to be found manuals of philosophy and literary criticism, the oeuvres of Derrida and Foucault...By and large the Archaeology that the general public wants and gets, whether it is Indiana Jones, the Time Team, or the Discovery programme, and the Archaeology carried out by public archaeologists, has parted company with the thinking Archaeology of the Universities. Ironically, the more academic archaeologists have invested in Thinking about their discipline, with the good intentions of making it more relevant to the world, the more remote their work has become.

Now let me make my own position clear - I agree that the big intellectual debates and the grand reconstructions in Archaeology tell us more about the preoccupations of our own age than emerge as unavoidable interpretations from the actual evidence of the past. That is not however to say that the froth of our age is not useful in defined ways. Thus, the desire to treat contemporary issues in our research often means we have to collect different kinds of data to previous researchers, so new kinds of evidence appear - even if the question at issue tends to drop out of interest after a few years. But this justification for theory reinforces its ephemeral nature, as an ever-changing set of stimuli driven by short-lived fads and leaving a lasting impression only in the creation of new and different data...

If Archaeology exists to make progress in our understanding of the Past - and if you do not accept this there can be no reason to continue with our work - then somehow

that improvement in our picture of past societies must be found rather in that ever larger mountain of empirical observations whose importance has been minimized by an overprivileging of theory during the last 30 years. Can we make something real and impressive out of the evidence archaeologists dig up, map, catalogue and order, those items of data Kuzminski called jokingly “one damn thing after another”?

Now, there are actually powerful but neglected reasons to elevate the importance of practical research in Archaeology over Thinking about the discipline, and if this is so, the most important people for the long-term results of our work are not ivory-tower philosopher-archaeologists but public professionals, and the excitement of fieldwork discovery which most grips the public is correctly focussed on the genuine cutting-edge of the discipline. They have it right, the universities have got it wrong!

This provocative inversion of our customary assumption that brilliant theorists are at the top of the pyramid of importance, with lowly laboratory experimenters at the bottom, was indeed a position argued for by the famous physicist Ernst Mach in a very public debate with Max Planck shortly before World War I. For Planck an elite of very brainy ideas-people set tasks for practical researchers and then told them what they had found, whilst for Mach the best science was democratic and arose from the physical skill and high craftsmanship of experimenters finding practical patterning in real-world, hands-on encounters with matter.

Apart from invoking Mach’s challenging perspective, I would also like to shock you by pointing out that recent research in Artificial Intelligence (AI) gives even stronger grounds for putting practical empirical research at the top of the creative knowledge pyramid and demoting thinking about things to the bottom! When AI specialists started to design computer robots which would duplicate human beings, the natural assumption was that the difficult bit would be programming those gifts that separate us from the rest of the animal world - conversing about philosophy, playing chess, doing mathematics - higher intelligence. In fact writing programmes to do this has proved to be easier than expected. Already computer robots can fool some people in a neighbouring room that they are talking with another human, computers can beat Chess grand-masters, and unsolved mathematical problems are being resolved through high-speed computing.

But mysteriously what proved extraordinarily difficult was in fact programming computer robots to do everyday human things - getting the cat to come out from under the bed, moving rapidly through an overgrown forest. It turns out that this so-called ‘peripheral intelligence’ is much more complex than ‘higher intelligence’ and has largely defied the ability of AI researchers to reduce it to logical programmes. Indeed robot designers have turned instead and with this time marked success to a Darwinian process of building robots with lots of variable properties of uncertain

purpose, merely copying or 'breeding from' those designs which adapted best to the experimental challenges set the machines. Current reasoning within the AI community is that whereas arguing about philosophy is a very recent human activity and has been of minimal survival value, hence gets no special support from the body, in contrast peripheral intelligence - finding our way about the physical and social world - has been a vital adaptive factor in higher ape and human evolution and hence exists as a very complex set of intuitive skills.

I have been a regular contributor to theory debates in Archaeology, and yet I have become more and more aware that my most significant contribution to the discipline will be from my fieldwork and the ordering of my field data into reconstructed patterns of past processes and lifeways - a 'thick description' of lost communities. Ideas indeed help me, but ultimately to get better data and look for new shapes and trends or discontinuities in the practical evidence.

This is the point where I shall enlist the aid of my almost one and a half million witnesses from nowhere in particular. I am a landscape archaeologist, specializing in surface archaeology. I am setting myself a seemingly tough task to demonstrate to you that this kind of practical fieldwork is more informative than grand theory, since we do not even excavate, merely record and analyze those bits of underground settlements and other kinds of buried past human activity which modern farming ploughs up and brings to the surface. But, whereas I can knock up a reasonable theory paper in a few weeks of library work, to impress the intelligentsia at Theory conferences - when it comes to my surface archaeology, let me tell you - my project in Boeotia, Central Greece began in 1978; 22 years on, with my Co-Director Anthony Snodgrass, I am preparing the first volume of publication and am still extracting additional subtleties of human activity from the incredibly-complex evidence we obtained in the field. Not only is this hands-on encounter with the rich web of past activity traces the most profitable environment for the production of lasting knowledge about earlier societies, but I can sense that I am using my abilities to their fullest, from the physical associations that arise. Mach referred to this when he talked about Psychophysics - the reinforcing pleasure we get from manipulation and probing of the physical world. My research involves walking, with teams of students (many of whom were kind enough to come and listen to me today), every field, hill and valley in extensive landscapes, counting and taking a sample of all the ancient artefacts we see on the surface (usually small broken pieces of ceramic or potsherds). We get immense physical pleasure from moving across the land and enumerating by quality and quantity the contents of the soil surface in relation with the changing properties of the landscape. Recently the American biologist E.O.Wilson and the Oxford physicist John Barrow explained this pleasure in Landscape with their Agrophilia and Biophilia hypotheses - human beings receive chemical gratification which makes us feel good when we do things that have become inbuilt survival skills. Humans developed for

millions of years as expert foragers in open landscapes and we hence needed to note and explore the changing properties of the natural environment essential for obtaining food and avoiding dangers.

So here I am, fieldwalking, using the best part of my intelligence - the peripheral part - to make intuitive and pleasurable contact with the landscape and those clues to how past peoples lived and worked there - can I find a 'knowable' past that outshines the passing stories of theory? I shall take you now to one small sector of Greece - a mere 7 square kilometres out of the 50 or so we have walked over since the Project began 20 years ago. Now here is a surprise - this area, consisting of two small valleys and an intervening low range of hills, contains only one small cluster of visible archaeological remains on the surface. In the north, beside one valley, once lay an important classical city - Thespieae; its ruins are so scanty that only practised eyes can spot them - a bank that marks a Late Roman fort, traces of brick pillars and a cut stone outline that are the remains of Roman baths and Early Christian churches. In the mid-1980s we laid a giant grid across the whole valley - almost 600 squares over an area of one and a half square kilometres. The whole locality is fortunately intensively farmed, and pottery lies densely exposed, which in the downtown area of such Greco-Roman towns can easily reach 1/4 of a million pieces of surface pottery per hectare. We carefully counted the surface finds and noted the points where dense urban debris dropped off rapidly into levels typical of rural activity, thus defining the city at its maximum extent - some 100 hectares or 1 square kilometre. Empirical study from excavated towns suggests this would represent something like 14,000 inhabitants. From the millions of broken pots lying on the city surface we collected some 12,000 pieces and dated them, then put back the finds for each phase onto the grid of the city. The broad lines of Thespieae's history emerged clearly: a small village in early farming times - the Neolithic, then several adjacent hamlets in the Bronze Age; the Classical Greek city began also as several small hamlets that later exploded and merged into the giant 100 hectare town by 400 BC; in Roman times however economic and political decline had caused the town to shrink to almost 1/3 of its previous maximum, and in Late Antiquity a fort was built of ruined Greek monuments in a small part of the town against the rising threat from barbarian invasions. One part of this Late Roman town, which lay just outside the fort, later became a flourishing medieval village, and it could be that although the city disappeared in the troubled post-Roman Dark Ages, a group of peasant farmers remained at the site till the 13th century AD, getting more numerous as Byzantine civilisation reintroduced peace and prosperity to Greece. It seems that in another troubled period, the 14th and 15th centuries AD, the villagers moved elsewhere for reasons of security, but they returned by the 17th century and now live on a hill overlooking the ancient city.

But what of the rural hinterland, the countryside beyond the walls of ancient Thespieae city, where nearly all the wealth and support for those many thousands of

inhabitants was derived? Let us pass out through the city wall and walk south into a 5 kilometre square area. In this bloc of landscape there is not a single standing monument, no visible archaeology, until you learn to spot the minor differences in shape, colour and texture that distinguish small pieces of ancient broken pottery from stones and clods of soil. Then in fact, the entire surface is seen to be an enormous archaeological site. When every field had been walked, and a continuous count of surface artefact density made, we had recorded 1.37 million pieces of ancient pottery, some 2 and a half thousand potsherds per hectare - or in practical terms, with every step you saw another piece of pottery.

In some 13 places this carpet of pottery grew unusually dense to over 4000 or 5000 sherds a hectare, and these we made small study grids over, since they should represent rural farms or villages - the farms are usually a few hundred square metres, the villages one or two hectares in area. At first it seemed easy enough to collect the pottery from these rural 'sites' and map them by period to show how large the country population was in comparison to the expansion and contraction of the city they belonged to. But our obsessive counting, mapping and dating of pottery from both these dense spots and the carpet that covered all the rest of the landscape revealed all kinds of curious and difficult features, suggesting a far more elaborate set of past human behaviours at work. Firstly, if these highspots in the countryside with lots of pottery were places where rural farms and villages lay, how were we to account for the over a million bits of broken pot that filled all the rest of the countryside? Secondly, we also found 4 locations where there were small clusters of very beautiful fine pottery of Classical date, but here the surface density was less than the average for the whole landscape.

I did not use elaborate thinking to understand the complexity which seemed to be emerging from our observations, I looked with more and more close attention to the features of the data we had collected - and it took more than 10 years to tease apart the different kinds of past behaviour we were picking up signals from.

What do I now suggest we have found in the countryside of ancient Thespieae city? The story begins with very faint traces of a past human landscape whose evidence has 99% disappeared to erosion and plough destruction: all across the whole 5 square kilometres we found sporadic finds of prehistoric coarse pottery and stone tools - in 2s and 3s, and although the 17 identified, 'official' rural sites were full of Classical Greek and Roman pottery, half of them also gave us a similar handful of prehistoric finds. When I examined the sampling statistics of what these finds should mean, it probably suggests that there are up to 20,000 pieces of prehistoric pottery in this small area of landscape - but seemingly no prehistoric settlements! Empirical research suggests that even that reconstructed evidence is a small surviving proportion of the original density of prehistoric artefacts across our landscape. The kind of

rural life most plausibly giving rise to such vestigial data is a period of some 4-5000 years when the first farmers in this area lived in small farms, whose life ran a mere 1-2 generations, then a new farm was built on fresh farmland nearby. Across this immense period eventually the entire countryside - all of it very fertile land - was at one time or another the location of a small family farm. Around 2000 BC with the later Bronze Age this evidence drops off and people nucleated into villages, 3 of which we found on the edges of the study area but none within. Our countryside is reoccupied again at the time of the great expansion of the Classical Greek city of Thespieae, and the people of that city-state, whether living within the walls or outside in its rural territory, have left us four kinds of behaviour detectable in the patterns of the relevant pottery we found.

Firstly, the vast majority of the citizens of this city state must have lived in the walled town with its around 14,000 inhabitants - the density of farms and villages of classical date in its countryside represents less than 30% of the total citizen body. No wonder that politics was so central to ancient Greek life! Secondly, amongst the rural sites with their abnormal amounts of surface pottery, most showed a strong Classical Greek presence, and from the extent of the pottery scatter for just that period we can estimate whether they were family farms or small villages. Careful study of the type of pots being broken at these sites help us fill out the picture of the kinds of everyday activities rural farmers carried out at these country estates - storage vessels, vessels for preparing food, finer tablewares, lamps, beehives, fragments of olive and wine presses. The third phenomenon was the most intriguing - over a million of all the pieces of pottery coating the countryside under study lay not on these rural sites but in between them, in the open fields, and 80% of it belonged only to the Classical Greek period - the very time when the city itself reached unparalleled size. One explanation was erosion - could all this broken pot have been washed out and ploughed away from the city itself and the 17 rural sites? Empirical geomorphological study shows this to be impossible. Could they represent generations of donkeys accidentally dropping loads in the fields, or farmers eating their lunch and smashing pottery in drunken moments? The extraordinary numbers and almost complete cover of the land surface rule this out.

Similar carpets of household debris have been found around ancient towns in the Middle East, and in recent history are comparable to the nightsoil of 19th West European cities collected and taken into the countryside around - thus the origin is systematic collection of urban refuse for use as crop fertiliser or 'bemesting' in the farming lands around. Elsewhere such intensive rubbish collection to aid crop production coincides with periods of high-population in the towns concerned. What more likely period for such activity than the one phase when the town of Thespieae reached a vast extent? We can even raise the question as to whether the obsessive manuring activity of Classical Greek times marks overpopulation and increasing soil

decline from overcropping, suggesting one reason for the subsequent implosion of the city to one third its size by Roman times.

Finally, the fourth kind of Classical activity in this landscape is represented by 4 small areas with a shortage of broken pottery but unusual numbers of very fine pottery. These are actually small rural family cemeteries, with special kinds of vessels deposited with the dead. These places are impoverished numerically because farmers of this period did not cultivate and spread manure across cemetery areas.

After this climax of population and land use in town and country, the subsequent Roman and Early Christian eras show radical changes to everyday life. As I mentioned already, the city itself lost some 2/3rds of its population. In the countryside the intensive manuring disappears, clearly because the number of mouths to feed had been so diminished. Also, in place of the small family farms and the villages of free citizens of Classical Greek times we now find large villa estates and a few villages - which may well be those of dependent labourers working on those villas. Roman period travel guides and geographies tell us that Thespieae was a pretty flourishing place, but now this seems to reflect good times for big landowners rather than for peasants.

After the collapse of Roman power, in the Middle Ages, most people clustered into villages some kilometres apart in the landscape, and ancient cities were usually downgraded to such a status - Thespieae city suffers such a fate. In the rural area to its south, we did find another medieval hamlet, some 2 kilometres from the medieval village at the city itself, and this is dated to a time of revival when Byzantine civilisation was at its peak. Not surprisingly, the needs of these two small nucleated settlements were easily met without intensive farming, and no carpet of rubbish is found of this date smeared over surrounding hills. During the following centuries of Crusader and Turkish occupations of our area, villages remained modest and few people sought life in the open countryside, and when in the late 19th century AD a new political stability and global trade penetrated into our rustic area and the villages exploded again into several thousand inhabitants, the use of modern fertilisers, improved crops and stock, and a population still way below classical Greek levels, meant that domestic rubbish stayed on and around the villages themselves - where we later collected it so that my colleague Joanita Vroom could chart the impact of factory economies and wider trade on these traditional Greek villages.

I have just constructed a narrative for you, to account for the main trends in 9000 years of landscape history in Central Greece. In it, theoretical models have certainly played a part, and some of those have stemmed from the preoccupations of our age: our current heightened ecology awareness, a Marxist concern for class conflict reflecting my youth in the 60s and 70s. There are clear influences also from contin-

gent factors in my own academic development: the centrality of landscape archaeology came from researching with Eric Higgs and his Palaeoeconomy group, my obsession with counting and measuring things to justify reconstructions shows the powerful influence of David Clarke and my early teaching years in a Nuclear Physics community at Bradford University.

And yet what really matters in my story from Boeotia is that vast mass of complex evidence we have taken 22 years to accumulate, order and seek patterns from. Later scholars with other preoccupations will I hope be able to use these observations both to formulate new projects to enrich my data, and to test my reconstructions as to what these patterns of past human activity amount to on the grand scale of historical meaning, but for each new generation of researchers the rising mountain of elaborate evidence provides stronger grounds for favouring certain interpretations over others and increasingly constrains weak models, enabling the past reality to come gradually into sharper focus.

The study of the Past, Rector, ladies and gentlemen, is therefore eminently 'do-able.' I have also argued to you today that Post-Modern loss of nerve regarding the concept of progress in reconstructing past lifeways is not only part of the froth of the chattering academic classes. More importantly, it is also remote from the important constructive edge of practical discovery, where we see that the past is also 'knowable' in ever better detail. I hope also that I have taken you back to the atmosphere which brought most archaeologists into their discipline - the excitement and uncertainty of physical encounters with the debris of lost communities; and shared with you the intense pleasure we get from the intuitive piecing together, from millions of fragments, of the original webs of human behaviour over space and time that constitute the fabric of History.

Ik heb gezegd.