



Universiteit
Leiden

The Netherlands

Interactions of theory, methodology and practice.

Bintliff, J.L.

Citation

Bintliff, J. L. (1996). Interactions of theory, methodology and practice. *Archaeological Dialogues*, 3, 246-255. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/7999>

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

License: [Leiden University Non-exclusive license](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/7999>

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

Interactions of theory, methodology and practice

Retrospect and commentary

John Bintliff

Introduction

The development of regional projects over the last generation has been heavily influenced by changing theoretical agendas. Landscape archaeology had been a growing force since the 1920s, but after the highpoint of the 'palaeoeconomy movement' in the 1970s its ecological wing has been unjustly neglected over this period. The New Archaeology of the 60s and 70s injected a fascination with geographical, statistical and sampling approaches that is unlikely to disappear as an essential aspect for the analysis of settlement history. Post-processualism in the 80s and 90s has encouraged renewed interest in what has been termed the 'culturalist' perspective – the ways in which people's perceptions of landscape influence their behaviour across it. But it always needs repeating that this derivative movement of post-modernism is only one of several sets of approaches that has emerged since New Archaeology, so I prefer the term post-structuralist for all these ideas of the 80s and 90s: other packages that I have found exciting to read about and try to apply in archaeology include world systems/core periphery theory, the approaches of the French *Annales* school, and the rapidly-expanding chaos and complexity theory. My current reading of the theoretical scene sees a strong movement away from the rather tedious battle of the 'isms' and towards a new eclecticism – this is very much in tune with the current general intellectual trend in the West towards neo-pragmatism. Not to be forgotten finally is the greater involvement of academic regional projects with public archaeology and heritage management, areas of professional archaeology that have probably become the dominant ones over this same time-period. Indeed some regional projects, including my own in Boeotia, Central Greece, see the creation of a regional heritage centre as the logical outcome of what began as an academic research project.

I would like briefly and provocatively to make a series of points about the recent past and possible future of regional projects, before commenting on the excellent and thought-provoking papers that were first presented at the Leiden conference.

Scale of project teams

We have seen the number of specialists grow – many projects utilize alongside fieldwalkers or diggers, geophysicists, geochemists, environmental scientists, anthropologists, archivists, GIS operators, and lithic or ceramic specialists in batteries... Is the day of the one-person or single-period regional project gone? Personally I think we are morally-bound to deal equally

well with all periods that a regional project reveals data for, and in any case I find it hard to see how one understands a landscape better than through tracing varied ways of settling in it in different eras. I also believe we have a scientific duty to carry out a sophisticated level of collection and recording, so that for example in field survey we must have detailed off-site and gridded on-site data. All this does mean a pretty large team and a multi-period, multi-specialist group. But there are ways to avoid vastly-expensive and enormous teams being required: close collaboration for example between British field surveys in Greece over many years has led to a tacit agreement that each project experiments with a specific approach to illuminate widely-occurring regional phenomena. Thus for example, the characteristic rural site of classical times, the family farm has been looked at through phosphates by the Laconia survey (Cavanagh et al. 1996), our Boeotia project has used geophysics and trace element soil chemistry (Bintliff 1992), whilst the Kea survey has analyzed farm ceramic assemblages for functional regularities (Whitelaw in press).

Scale of regional analysis

Pressure for change has come at the micro- and macro-level of regional research. On the one hand, regional survey projects previously aimed at several thousand square kilometres have shrunk, in the Mediterranean at least, over our period to tens of kilometres. The fact is that the more careful we have become at looking for data the more we have found, and the more complex and interesting such data have turned out to be. The New Archaeology and the salvage archaeology movements both promoted this process. Luckily GIS has come along to help us look for structure in this dense data. Personally, I believe we have to see an end to fallacious shortcuts involving gross sampling strategies (for a recent example: Carreté et al. 1995): we know it doesn't work because human activity isn't that regular, and since we still don't understand all the variability across the archaeological landscape anywhere, how on earth can we design a foolproof sample scheme? In any case humans use landscapes two dimensionally, often from foci hard to find. We must work from human territorial behaviour to uncover all the settlement dynamics in a region. The minimum unit is probably several adjacent parishes/communes as totally investigated as possible. Lehmann's 1939 study of long-term settlement dynamics in Eastern Crete (Lehmann 1939) showed all this, in the German *Landschaftsgeschichte* tradition, but such approaches have generally been forgotten in the Mediterranean (but not in north-western Europe). To cite a more recent example from my own Boeotia survey for the necessity of near-total survey cover: just beyond ancient Hyettos city complete field survey located a chain of five small sites over a distance of several hundred metres that between them may cover the entire sequence of activity in the commune from the immediate post-Roman era to the last century. Moreover in covering our regions, commune by commune, we increasingly may have to crawl along. Immediately adjacent in another direction to the site of ancient Hyettos, the overlapping of small and large rural sites and manuring scatters of ceramics could only have been disentangled in such a densely used landscape through total survey – where minor variations in the quantity but also quality of surface finds revealed a large farmstead hidden within the city's two kilometre radius manuring

halo. The empirical message seems clear: don't sample the landscape – record it continuously or you'll never understand it.

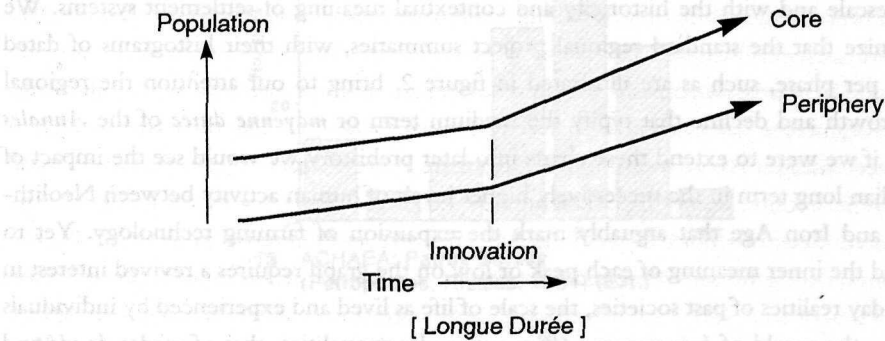
At the other end of the scale, regional projects have been looking outside the region. Firstly, to compare and contrast settlement evolution – the *Roman Landscapes* volume (Barker and Lloyd 1991) was a landmark within the Mediterranean in this process of inter-project comparison. Secondly, especially under the stimulus of world systems/core periphery theory, the interpretation of regional dynamics is seen as requiring attention to interactions with the wider world. For example I have recently analyzed regional growth in the various provinces of ancient Greece using survey data (Bintliff 1996): there is great variety in the timing and scale of demographic, economic and urban takeoff. The detailed analysis (see figure 1) suggests that regional growth dynamics normally result from a combination of internal processes, following the introduction of technical/economic innovations, as well as core-periphery effects linking regions to each other. Graeme Barker has been investigating similar interregional growth patterns in Iron Age Italy (Barker 1995b), and Bob Chapman for Copper-Bronze Age Spain (Chapman 1990).

Approaches to the landscape

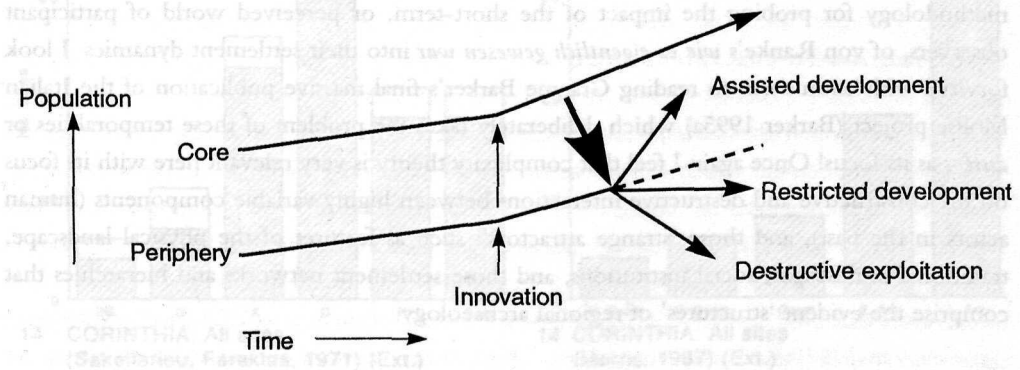
Earlier I mentioned the widespread decline of interest in human ecology where regional projects are concerned, which I attribute to post-processualism's abhorrence of anything biological in human behaviour. This is especially debilitating for regional projects, since the data we have from regional settlement and land use dynamics consistently point to regularities in human behaviour which go well beyond local cultural systems and specific eras. The best way as mentioned earlier to trace the dynamics of regional change is to take *Siedlungskammer*, adjacent parishes likely to be occupied in almost every period, and exhaustively trace the varied expressions of human activity across them. Thankfully the Netherlands are a centre of excellence in this approach: I well recall Waterbolk's work on Iron Age settlement and its relations to modern rural settlement (Waterbolk 1977), but we now have the excellent monograph of Heidinga (Heidinga 1987) on the game-theory of long-term settlement dynamics within core settlement zones. There is a lot of exciting new work on the size of settlements, their spacing, emanating from new and old work of a sociobiological nature; also from the sciences the vast new world of chaos and complexity theory provides us, through research into so-called self-organizing systems in nature, with great potential for exploring the agency-structure theme of human communities adapting and modifying regional landscapes: this means watering down the culturalist dominance in current theory. Tony Wilkinson's model (Wilkinson 1994) for cyclical hierarchies of sites springs to mind as an insight relevant to this framework that is very exciting to read. The growing interest in French *Annales* history (Bintliff 1991; Knapp 1992) has brought with it a revival of interest in the French geographer Vidal de la Blache's exploration of regional possibilism as a way to marry the mutual influence of landscape and human culture on each other: landscapes exercise constraining and enabling effects on regional societies.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT MODELS

A: 'SEPARATE DEVELOPMENT'



B: 'CORE-PERIPHERY MODIFICATION'



C: 'CORE-PERIPHERY ROLE INVERSION' - eg Ecological overkill

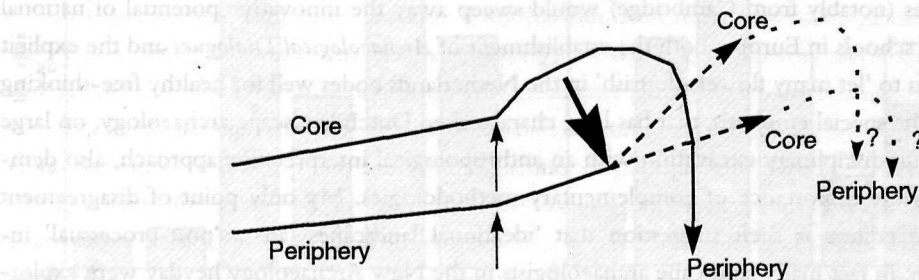


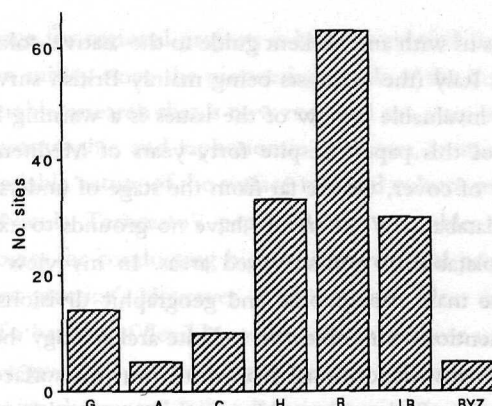
Figure 1. Regional development models (from Bintliff 1996).

Timescales and mentalities

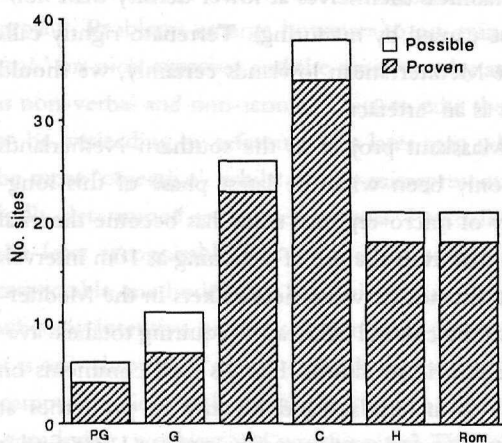
The final topic I would highlight for attention is a convergence of our new interest in *Annales* scholarship and a positive influence from post-processualism: a growing concern with pluralities of timescale and with the historicity and contextual meaning of settlement systems. We now recognize that the standard regional project summaries, with their histograms of dated settlements per phase, such as are illustrated in figure 2, bring to our attention the regional cycles of growth and decline that typify the medium term or *moyenne durée* of the *Annales* school; but if we were to extend these charts into later prehistory we would see the impact of the Braudel long term in the successively higher levels of human activity between Neolithic, Bronze and Iron Age that arguably mark the expansion of farming technology. Yet to comprehend the inner meaning of each peak or low on the graph requires a revived interest in the day-to-day realities of past societies, the scale of life as lived and experienced by individuals in the past – the world of *événements* – of events and personalities, that of *modes de vie* and *mentalités* – traditional ways of using and seeing the landscape. This is why many regional projects have taken on a new rapprochement with historians to see if they can develop a methodology for probing the impact of the short-term, or perceived world of participant observers, of von Ranke's *wie es eigentlich gewesen war* into their settlement dynamics. I look forward with enthusiasm to reading Graeme Barker's final massive publication of the Italian Molise project (Barker 1995a) which deliberately takes the problem of these temporalities or *durées* as its focus! Once again I feel that complexity theory is very relevant here with its focus on the constructive and destructive interactions between highly variable components (human actors in the past), and those 'strange attractors': such as features of the physical landscape, traditional mindscapes, social institutions, and those settlement networks and hierarchies that comprise the evident 'structures' of regional archaeology.

Commentary on the session papers

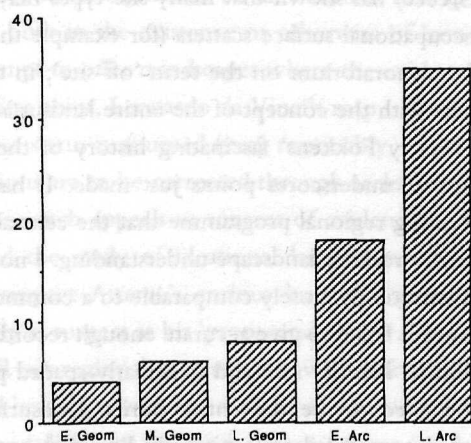
May I commence by underlining the significance of some of the editorial remarks by Peter van Dommelen and Mieke Prent. I have for some time been concerned that 'hegemonic' mind-structures (notably from Cambridge) would sweep away the innovative potential of national research schools in Europe; both the establishment of *Archaeological Dialogues* and the explicit intention to 'let many flowers flourish' in the Netherlands bodes well for healthy free-thinking there. The special emphasis, that has long characterised Dutch landscape archaeology, on large scale, multidisciplinary excavation with an anthropological interpretative approach, also demonstrates the importance of complementary methodologies. My only point of disagreement with the editors is their suggestion that 'ideational landscapes' are a 'post-processual' innovation; in fact many landscape archaeologists in the New Archaeology heyday were exploring symbolic and sacred geographies (the touchstone for the variety of approaches practised in the 1970s is Flannery's *Early Mesoamerican Village*, 1976). Since the 1980s both our 'processual' methodology for reconstructing settlement systems and our interest in 'landscapes of the mind' have grown side-by-side.



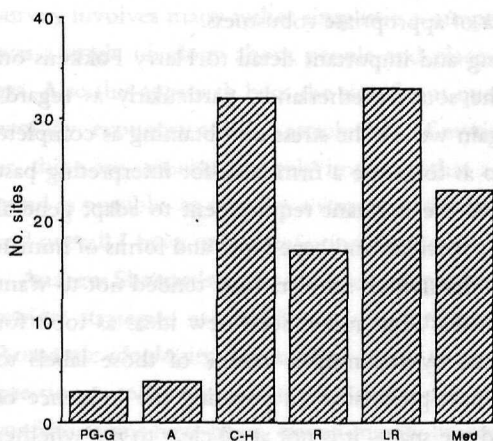
13 ACHAEA: Patras Survey
(Petropoulos, Rizakis, 1994) (Ext.)



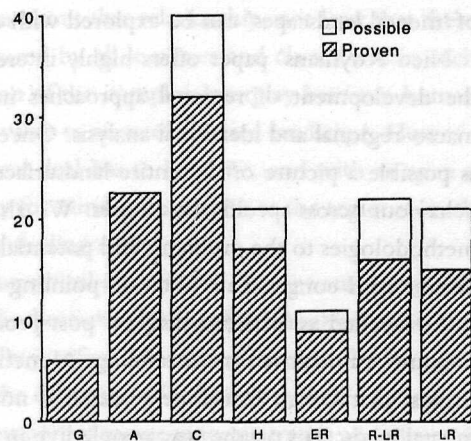
14 CORINTHIA: All sites
(Sakellariou, Faraklas, 1971) (Ext.)



14 CORINTHIA: All sites
(Morris, 1987) (Ext.)



15 METHANA SURVEY
(Mee, 1986-7, 1987-8) (Int.)



16 NEMEA VALLEY SURVEY
(Wright, 1990; Alcock, 1993) (Int.)

Figure 2. A selection of regional survey project results (from the Peloponnese, S. Greece), plotting site numbers by period. Surveys are distinguished as extensive or intensive (from Bintliff 1996).

Nicola Terrenato provides us with an excellent guide to the 'native-colonist' debate in how to do field survey in central Italy (the colonists being mainly British survey theorists!). What I would like to add to his invaluable review of the issues is a warning linked to what I have written in the first half of this paper: despite forty years of Mediterranean field survey at medium- to full-intensity of cover, we are far from the stage of understanding the properties of the surface landscape database. We therefore have no grounds to expect that samples of a region should be extrapolatable to non-surveyed areas. In my view blocks of contiguous parishes cutting across the main topographic and geographic divisions must be the basis of survey. As for those he mentions who object to 'off-site archaeology' being recorded, I fail to comprehend their logic. If post-depositional factors etc. blur the surface record, this is all the more reason to record surface finds without bias towards assumed 'sites'; a growing body of empirical research (by Barker, Mattingly and Stoddart in Italy, and on my Boeotia survey in Greece) has shown that many site types may manifest themselves at lower density than non-occupational surface scatters (for example those caused by manuring). Terrenato rightly calls for a moratorium on the term 'off-site'; in the Mediterranean lowlands certainly, we should start with the concept of the entire landsurface as an 'artefact'.

Harry Fokkens' fascinating history of the Maaskant project in the southern Netherlands further underscores points just made. It has only been with the latest phase of this long-running regional programme that the centrality of micro-regional study has become the vital key to realistic landscape understanding. I note that even the use of trenching at 10m intervals (interestingly closely comparable to a common distance between fieldwalkers in the Mediterranean) failed to give accurate enough records of the cultural landscape, requiring total excavation to identify rare and irregularly-spaced prehistoric structures. Harry's final comments on the need to see the entire buried landsurface as an artefact and identify its properties at maximum detail are entirely in line with my own experience in surface survey; I also find it significant that the study of microregions or 'parish-like' units is given a high profile in his recommendations. If we all follow these painstaking approaches then the exciting possibilities of 'mental landscapes' can be explored with data of appropriate robustness.

Nico Roymans' paper offers highly interesting and important detail to Harry Fokkens on the development of regional approaches in the south Netherlands, particularly as regards macro-regional and ideational analysis. Once again we see the stress on obtaining as complete as possible a picture of the entire landsurface so as to create a firm basis for interpreting past behaviour across specific landscapes. We also see the constant requirement to adapt general methodologies to the problems and potential of particular landscape types and forms of human behaviour. I congratulate Nico on pointing out that Dutch scholars have tended not to want to be labelled as 'processualist' or 'post-processualist', but rather seen new ideas as tools for ongoing cumulative understanding. Nonetheless, by retaining a vestige of those labels to suggest that Dutch landscape research is now 'post-processual' in pursuing the influence of mental landscapes on the way people live in and use space, it is not at all clear to me whether current work is based on 'imaginative, emotional' response (cf. Tilley) or an evidence-focussed reconstruction of past mindscapes more comparable to Renfrew's 'cognitive processualism'; it does seem to me to matter a great deal to outsiders if mindscape reconstructions are claimed to be verifiable or not!

Graeme Barker's message for regional projects is both to remind us of the immense progress made in Mediterranean survey since the pioneering work of the South Etruria survey in the 1950s, and the considerable research that is now required at a very basic level to deal with the current problems of geomorphic and taphonomic processes, irrational past economic behaviour and the highly variable nature of the surface material culture record across the millennia. In some contrast to Nicola Terrenato's paper, Barker assembles a coherent view on the appropriate methodologies for conducting high-quality regional projects in the Mediterranean, with an eye to 'best practice'. However, I suspect their ideas can be reconciled through Terrenato's concept of a battery of flexible methodologies, whose use requires regional selection and adaptation in a given project context to be really effective.

Peter Attema's paper on the central Italian Pontine project is a very stimulating and courageous attempt to investigate the mindscapes for that region at each stage of its occupation. Deconstruction of literary and cartographic depictions is shown to be an effective first approach. Problems emerge however to my mind, both in the existence or otherwise of 'controls' on such exercises and the praiseworthy attempt to offer mindscapes where the evidence is non-verbal and non-iconic. Thus, to take the first point, Leonardo da Vinci's map is shown to be misleading by reference to a later map whose status is assumed (very reasonably, too) to be more 'objective', whilst similar misrepresentations are to be corrected through archaeologically-determined settlement systems. I actually see such appeals to sources of evidence with the least recognisable bias as essential to ground the study of ideational landscapes into a respectable methodology, but this makes very suspect Attema's curious leap of argument whereby intensive survey is presented as potentially as suspect as his 'propaganda maps'. Surely it is only through a 'source-critical' approach to all our regional evidence that we can fruitfully compare ancient and recent attitudes to a regional landscape with the realities of where people were living, working and worshipping? The second difficulty for me is where Attema 'reads' his site distributions in mindscape terms without adducing a methodology: linking early historic myths which refer to sectors of a region, to 'taskscape' behaviour detected through survey involves many rather simplistic assumptions about that relationship, not least that there was a single ideology about people and places shared by all localities and classes within each era. Also this approach begs the significant question of the complex interplay between human ecology, economy and the attachment of mythic value to areas of a varied landscape. However, these are criticisms merely implying that a great deal has to be done, and with as open a mind as possible, to develop a strong methodology for mindscape analysis at the regional level, and overall I have only admiration for Peter's pathfinding study!

Andrew Sherratt's paper is a wide-ranging philosophical disquisition on contrasting regional project strategies as variations on a timeless split between Rationalist/Enlightenment and Romantic ideologies. His analysis seems to me fully justified and it does raise the fundamental question as to how useful to the development of the discipline of archaeology such ideological confrontations have been, driven mainly by contemporary socioeconomic trends and personal philosophies. Andrew certainly finds the current version: the perennial 'processual v. post-processual' squabble, unrewarding, recognizing the merits of both sides. Yet Andrew's contribution does not go far enough for me, since he does not present a coherent methodology for integrating the Enlightenment and Romantic concerns into an overall set of approaches that

could be applied on a regional project. I believe this can and should be done. In two recent papers on the history and philosophy of archaeology (Bintliff 1993; Bintliff 1995) I have also explored the relevance of the Enlightenment – Romanticism (or Apollonian – Dionysian, to use Nietzsche's contrast) ideological polarity, and argued that there can exist a broader theoretical base for archaeology wherein complementary approaches reveal different facets of the past or familiar facets from new directions. In this attempt, based on the mature philosophy of Wittgenstein, to reconcile seemingly conflicting viewpoints, the unity of potential knowledge about the past is reasserted. I sense, reading the Dutch contributions to this session, that a similar confidence and optimism about employing diverse approaches within the framework of a consciously analytical programme of investigation, already characterizes the current practice of progressive regional project directors in the Netherlands. Much the same seems to me to typify the recent work of Richard Bradley in British regional studies – someone who significantly has defied labelling according to the sequence of theoretical 'isms' that have afflicted British theory since the late 1960s.

A final but far from insignificant point, which Andrew Sherratt develops at length in the second half of his paper, is his challenge to regional studies to rethink their regions as merely parts of far larger systems of interaction. This does underline my earlier remarks, and those made by Roymans, on the necessity of a macro-regional perspective. Of course Andrew, as is well known, is wholly committed to a rather extreme form of world system or even neo-diffusionist perspective on European later prehistory, and most of us will wish to see far more powerful arguments from the data for his controversial approach. Thus, for example, his rather throwaway comment that the Kea survey team should have assumed that the primary factor in island settlement history was external trade, runs directly into conflict with virtually all our evidence for the nature of Aegean economics in almost every period.

In conclusion, to judge by the contributions to this symposium, regional studies in archaeology are in a very healthy state indeed – and most especially in the Netherlands!

References

- Barker, G., 1995a: *A Mediterranean valley. Landscape archaeology and Annales history in the Biferno Valley*, London.
- Barker, G., 1995b: Regionality in Italian prehistory, or why did the Etruscan city-states develop only in Etruria? *Past*, 19 April, 11-12.
- Barker, G., and Lloyd, J. (eds), 1991: *Roman landscapes. Archaeological survey in the Mediterranean region*, London, British School at Rome.
- Bintliff, J.L., 1991: The contribution of an Annaliste/structural history approach to archaeology, in J.L. Bintliff (ed.), *The Annales School and archaeology*, Leicester, 1-33.
- Bintliff, J.L., 1992: Appearance and reality. Understanding the buried landscape through new techniques in field survey, in M. Bernardi (ed.), *Archeologia del paesaggio*, Florence, 89-137.
- Bintliff, J.L., 1993: Why Indiana Jones is smarter than the post-processualists, *Norwegian archaeological review* 26, 91-100.

- Bintliff, J.L., 1995: "Whither archaeology?" revisited, in M. Kuna, and N. Venclova (eds), *Whither archaeology? Papers in honour of Evzen Neustupny*, Institute of Archaeology, Prague, 24-35.
- Bintliff, J.L., 1996: Regional survey, demography, and the rise of complex societies in the ancient Aegean. Core-periphery, neo-Malthusian, and other interpretive models, *Journal of field archaeology* 23.
- Carreté, J.-M., S.J. Keay, and M. Millett 1995: *A Roman provincial capital and its hinterland. The survey of the territory of Tarragona, Spain*, Michigan, (Journal of Roman archaeology supplement 15).
- Cavanagh, W., R. Jones, and A. Sarris 1996: The phosphate and geophysical surveys, in W. Cavanagh, J. Crouwel, R.W.V. Catling and G. Shipley (eds), *Continuity and change in a Greek rural landscape. The Laconia survey volume II*, London, (Annual of the British School at Athens, Supplementary volume 27), 235-261.
- Chapman, R., 1990: *Emerging complexity. The later prehistory of South-East Spain, Iberia and the West Mediterranean*, Cambridge.
- Flannery, K.V., (ed.), 1976: *The Early Mesoamerican village*, New York.
- Heidinga, H.A., 1987: *Medieval settlement and economy North of the Lower Rhine*, Assen/Maastricht.
- Knapp, A.B., (ed.), 1992: *Archaeology, Annales, and ethnohistory*, Cambridge.
- Lehmann, H., 1939: Die Siedlungsräume Ostkretas, *Geographische Zeitschrift* 45, 212-228.
- Waterbolk, H.T., 1977: Walled enclosures of the Iron Age in the North of the Netherlands, *Palaeohistoria* 19, 98-172.
- Whitelaw, T., in press: Reconstructing a classical landscape with figures: some interpretive explorations in northwest Keos, in R. Francovich and H. Patterson (eds), *Methodological issues in Mediterranean landscape archaeology. Artefact studies*, Oxford.
- Wilkinson, T.J., 1994: The structure and dynamics of dry-farming states in Upper Mesopotamia, *Current anthropology* 35, 483-520.