

Time perspectives, palimpsests and the archaeology of time

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Abstract

This paper explores the meaning of time perspectivism, its relationship to other theories of time used in archaeological interpretation, and the ways in which it can be implemented through an analysis of the palimpsest nature of the material world we inhabit. Palimpsests are shown to be a universal phenomenon of the material world, and to form a series of overlapping categories, which vary according to their geographical scale, temporal resolution and completeness of preservation. Archaeological examples are used to show how different types of palimpsest can be analyzed to address different sorts of questions about the time dimension of human experience, and the relationship between different types of processes and different scales of phenomena. Objections to the apparently deterministic and asocial character of time perspectivism, and its apparent neglect of subjective experience and individual action and perception, are dealt with. The line of thinking developed here is used, in its turn, to critique other approaches to the archaeology of time, and conventional understandings of the relationship between past, present and future.

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Introduction

For many archaeologists, time depth is what gives archaeology its distinctiveness as an intellectual discipline. For others, it is the emphasis on the materiality of human existence, once derided as a second-hand method of studying human activities, but now turned into a virtue by the many studies of material culture that emphasize the active role of artifacts and material structures in human action and interaction. These two themes are linked, for it is the durable properties of the material universe

that give to human awareness a sense of time extending beyond individual lives and perceptions, and to archaeologists the opportunity for empirical exploration of human activities beyond the reach of personal observation, oral testimony or written records.

The past two decades have witnessed a proliferation and diversification of theoretical discussions about time and its impact on archaeological interpretation, which have served to open up a far-reaching exploration of this link between time and the material world (see Bailey, 2005; Lucas, 2005; for summaries). Discussion has followed several intertwined though often divergent themes, drawing on a wide range of sources of inspiration including the intrinsic properties of archaeological data

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themselves, and other disciplines such as social anthropology, history, geology, paleontology, philosophy and mathematics.

One theme, which shows many points of convergence with the literature on site formation processes (Schiffer, 1976, 1987), and with the concerns of geologists and paleontologists (Behrensmeyer, 1982; O'Brien and Lyman, 2000), is the examination of the temporal and spatial properties of archaeological data, how we measure these, more or less arbitrarily, and how differences in temporal scale and resolution of archaeological datasets constrain or expand the questions we can investigate empirically about the past (Renfrew, 1981; Gamble, 1986; Ebert, 1992; Rossignol and Wandsnider, 1992; Stahl, 1993; Stern, 1993, 1994; Zvelebil, 1993; Ramenofsky and Steffen, 1998; Lock and Molyneaux, 2006). The latter theme, following Bailey (1981, 1983, 1987), is sometimes labeled as 'time perspectivism' (Fletcher, 1992; Murray, 1997, 1999b; Holdaway and Wandsnider, 2006; Wandsnider, 2004; Hull, 2005). Important variants on this theme that draw more heavily on other disciplines to address differences of timescale, but which usually eschew the 'time perspective' label, are the application of ideas drawn from the *Annales* school of history (Bintliff, 1991; Knapp, 1992), and the use of non-linear dynamic theory (Van der Leeuw and McGlade, 1997).

A second and readily comprehensible theme is the examination of the temporal awareness of past peoples, their sense of past and future, how that influenced their behaviour, and how it has varied or developed during the course of human history, whether for cultural or neuropsychological reasons (Clark, 1992; Murray, 1999a; Alcock, 2002; Bradley, 2002). A closely related theme is the durable properties of the material record as an extra dimension to human awareness and action, through its capacity to symbolize the passage of time or to shape human activities, especially in the form of the built environment such as burial mounds and dwelling structures (Bradley, 1991, 1993; Bailey, 1993; Fletcher, 1995).

Some discussions attempt to integrate elements of all three themes, often with an emphasis on the subjective element in temporal awareness (including our own as archaeologists), and its cultural, political or philosophical referents, drawing on contemporary social theory and philosophy (Shanks and Tilley, 1987; Gosden, 1994; Thomas, 1996; Harding, 2005; Lucas, 2005).

Throughout this literature there is a basic contrast between the differential temporal patterns of the material world that past people may have consciously recognized and used in their social life and cosmology, and the differential temporal patterns inherent in archaeological deposits that we as archaeologists seek to exploit to say more about the past and our relationship to it.¹

My emphasis in this paper is on the three perceptions that inspired the original definition of time perspectivism: the relatively coarse temporal resolution and palimpsest nature of much of the archaeological record; the possibility that the increased time depth and varied time resolution of observation afforded by archaeological data might allow us to perceive phenomena and processes not visible at smaller scales of observation; and the arbitrary nature of the boundary between 'past' and 'present'. I consider more carefully the definition of time perspectivism and its theoretical and operational implications, analyze the concept of 'palimpsest' and define some of its variant properties, examine the sorts of processes that may become visible on longer and coarser timescales, and address the problem of how to reconcile such longer-term phenomena with the emphasis on individual action and perception that has dominated much recent archaeological interpretation. For example, I draw on field data from my own experience, in particular the Klithi project, concerned with a 100,000-year record of activity in the Epirus region of northwest Greece at the scale of archaeological site and region (Fig. 1), and at ethnographic and archaeological scales of observation, and more fully discussed and published elsewhere (Bailey, 1997; Bailey et al., 1998; Green et al., 1998; Green, 2005). This theme of time perspectivism has been slowest to take root, generated most criticism, and created the most puzzlement and resistance, the reasons for which I touch on later.

¹ This corresponds to what I have previously described as subjective and objective approaches to time (Bailey, 1983), subjective meaning time concepts as experienced by prehistoric people, and objective meaning the temporal concepts as used by archaeologists looking in from the outside. 'Objective' here does not mean superior or neutral, nor does it deny that 'objective' studies in this sense have their own varying subjectivities. The distinction has given particular problems to those who wish to blur the boundary between the perceiving mind and the perceived object, and I avoid the usage here in the interests of obviating unnecessary misunderstandings.

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