

Recent Approaches to the History of Middle European Archaeology: Problems and Prospects

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In the past few years the number of books about aspects of the history of Middle European archaeology has considerably risen. High time to sum up the results, methodological approaches and problems so far.¹

Why is the history of science² at the moment so fashionable in German prehistoric archaeology? The reasons are probably manifold. First, this is certainly a result of the growing importance of self-reflection in science in general over the last decades. Secondly, there has been a general shift of interest in the history of science. At least since the *Deutscher Historikertag* 1998 in Frankfurt/Main with its heated discussion on historians' participation in the ideological underpinning and the actions of the Third Reich, the frontier between science and politics has been more intensively analysed; the connection between science and politics – or rather: of academics and the state – has become the centre of interest. As a result, archaeologists also began to take a closer look at their discipline and to question the role of their academic teachers in the usage of prehistoric archaeology for ideological purposes, especially during the Nazi regime. A third reason for the research done on archaeology particularly in the time of National Socialism might be the wish to 'get over' and exorcise it (cf. the term of 'national socialist tumor' [Bertemes 2002:108], which obviously needs to be cut out), the urge to uncover the horrors of that time and to have a critical look at one's own – i.e. German – history.

The books and articles which have appeared in the past few years differ markedly in aim and scope. Generally speaking there seem to be two main camps. On the one hand there is the historiography of institutions, people and research (e.g. part of the articles in Leube/Hegewisch 2002; RGK 2001; Müller-Wille in Piskorski/Hackmann/Jaworski 2002; Steuer 2001; Grünert 2002). On the other hand there are representatives of a more theoretical position. They aim for setting archaeological research in a wider context of contemporary history, the philosophical or theoretical currents of the time and the academic context (Halle 2002; Piskorski/Hackmann/Jaworski 2002; Biehl/Gramsche/Marciniak 2002). Most of them (especially Zofia and Stanisław Kurnatowski in Piskorski/Hackmann/Jaworski 2002 and the

¹ The following is a modified and extended English version of the essay 'Forschungsgeschichte: das neue Thema in der Archäologie?' in *Rundbrief der Arbeitsgemeinschaft Theorie in der Archäologie* 2/1, 2003, which introduces a number of reviews dealing with some of the most recent publications on the history of German archaeology: Biehl/Gramsche/Marciniak 2002; Halle 2002; Leube/Hegewisch 2002; Piskorski/Hackmann/Jaworski 2002; RGK 2001; Steuer 2001; see http://www.theorie-ag.de/Arena/aktuell/ARENA_0103.htm (05.12.2003).

² Unlike common English usage, we use the term 'science' in a very broad sense, embracing the natural sciences as well as the humanities; this mirrors the German understanding of 'Wissenschaft', which means both 'Naturwissenschaft' and 'Geisteswissenschaft'.

authors in Biehl/Gramsch/Marciniak 2002) understand 'history of science' as a history of ideas or concepts, of archaeological schools and internal influences.

Notwithstanding these differences in aim, there seem to be two alternatives of subdividing these approaches towards the history of our discipline in terms of methodology: 1. diachronic vs. anachronic approaches; 2. approaches from the outside vs. those from the inside. 'Anachronic' history of science illustrates in an evolutionary way 'the accomplishments of earlier scholars [...] as a series of steps, which lead into the heights of today's sciences'³ (Daniel 2001:362–363; cf. already Butterfield 1931). Usually it takes only one – the 'right' – theory into account and in the extreme only the development of recent knowledge. 'Great' scholars are only the ones who have contributed to theories and methodologies accepted at the time of writing (Carrier 2001:216).

'Diachronic' history of science works in the tradition of Thomas Kuhn. Earlier scholarly work is regarded as 'action and thinking which needs to be understood out of the context of its time'⁴ (Daniel 2001:363). Carrier (2001:218–219) defines this approach as a historiography 'which aims at a reconstruction of theories out of their respective self-image and wants to show the integration into the system of knowledge of its time'⁵ – Carrier accordingly sets theories into the centre of interest. This 'diachronic' history of science therefore has set its task at regarding scholars as well as their research and their theoretical background within their contemporary context. This includes any cul-de-sac scholarly knowledge might have gotten into as well as aspects which seem foreign or nonsense to us (cf. Daniel 2001:366). Any authentic reconstruction of theories and therefore science ought to show its coherence and plausibility at a given time.⁶

A second division in the publication seems to be the perspective chosen in relation to archaeology and its contemporary socio-political situation, which becomes most obvious in the two articles on archaeology in Piskorski/Hackmann/Jaworski 2002: Müller-Wille approaches the history of archaeology starting from outer occurrences, i.e. Third Reich. Using anthropological terminology, his approach might be called 'etic' in contrast to the 'emic' method of the Kurnatowskis. To them, history of science means understanding the influence of outer factors, in their case nationalism, on prehistoric archaeology and the development of its methodology and interpretation models. The authors' perspective is distinctly different. The Kurnatowskis take their standing point within archaeology and regard the 'outer world'. Müller-Wille on the other hand views archaeology from an outside point of view.

Leaving the anachronistic, 'Whig' (Butterfield 1931) interpretation of history aside, all of the aforementioned approaches do have their merits and can yield substantial contributions to our understanding of the history of prehistoric archaeology. This concerns the 'outside' perspective as well as the 'inside' one and more modestly aimed studies focussing on institutions and individuals as well as more ambitious ones, which take the contemporary background into full consideration.

³ 'Die Leistungen früherer Forscher werden [...] als Stufen von Treppchen abgebildet, die in die Höhe gegenwärtiger Wissenschaften hinaufführen'.

⁴ '[A]ls Handeln und Denken, das aus dem Kontext seiner Zeit heraus verstanden werden muss'.

⁵ '[eine Historiographie] die auf die Rekonstruktion von Theorien aus deren jeweiligem Selbstverständnis zielt und ihre Integration in das System des Wissens ihrer Zeit aufzeigen will'.

⁶ Obviously a true approach from within is impossible, as we cannot but include our knowledge today into our research and our description of results (cf. Carrier 2001:218, 220).

In general, the question whether archaeologists can do research on the history of their own discipline remains to be more openly discussed in Germany. There are some who want archaeologists to be restricted to 'editing of material' (Hänsel 2002). 'The occupation with the consequences of an epoch formed by modern politics for prehistoric research and the evaluation of the role of prehistoric research for a political system [...] we archaeologists ought to leave to the historians!'⁷ (Hänsel 2002). Some at least plead for a cooperation between historians and archaeologists (e.g. Callmer 2002). The self-confidence needed for independent research on the history of science, necessarily including setting it in a contemporary context, – a self-confidence which natural scientists have long gained – 'we archaeologists' seem still to be lacking.

However, research on the history of archaeology is not without its own pitfalls. In our opinion the following problems arise for the – German! – archaeological historiography in working on the history of its own discipline, especially on the time of National Socialism. A possibly understandable fear of criticizing influential traditions can affect research and the resulting publications. The closeness to the *Doktorväter* or '*Doktorgroßväter*', one's academic teachers or teacher's teachers, could prevent a distanced judgment of their role during National Socialism. Furthermore, treating such an emotionally soaked topic as the time of the Third Reich leads some archaeologists into a kind of 'hyper-objectivity', a pure enumeration of facts – people, locations, dates – instead of attempting a critical evaluation. Both lack of critique of traditions and 'hyper-objectivity' involve the danger to be content with facts. But only the uncovering of the structural preconditions, of the reasoning of the people involved and the understanding of traditional ways of thinking and never doubted premises which still influence today's research make the history of science relevant and worthwhile. Why were certain topics so intensively researched in their time? How does the work done on them affect our research today? And how do fields of research, concepts and ideas develop? So, as a supplementary consideration, working about the history of research and the history of science should not be divided from the theoretical background. Thereby, the contingency of research and its directions on contemporary socio-political circumstances become evident. Also, learning about how scientific knowledge develops helps to see new (methodological and theoretic) ways of thinking and to overcome the limits of one's own approach.

Taking up our initial question as to why the history of science is so popular in German archaeology at the moment, the answer probably lies somewhere in the middle and might include reasons we have not considered. Maybe the idea of self-reflected and self-reflecting science has simply at last also reached German archaeologists – which would include knowing about the history of one's own discipline.

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⁷ 'Die Beschäftigung mit einer durch moderne Politik geprägten Epoche in ihren Auswirkungen auf die prähistorische Forschung und die Beurteilung der Rolle der prähistorischen Forschung für ein politisches System [...] sollten wir Archäologen jedoch den Historikern überlassen!'

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IV. Publications by subscribers

Nathan Schlanger – see next section.

V. Publications suggested by subscribers

Marc-Antoine Kaeser 2004 *L'Univers du Préhistorien*. Paris: L'Harmattan. Price: 47€. [A splendid analysis of 19th century archaeology with a focus on Swiss archaeologist Édouard Desor].

Rosemary Sweet 2004 *Antiquaries. The Discovery of the Past in Eighteenth-Century Britain*. London: Hambledon and London. [A first rate analysis that will be reviewed in volume 15(1)].

Historical Manuscripts Commission, Guide to Sources for British History 12 2003 *Papers of British Antiquaries and Historians*. London: The Stationery Office.