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# Beyond crusades: how (not) to engage with alternative archaeologies

Cornelius Holtorf

## Abstract

Archaeologists have often felt uneasy when encountering alternative (fringe, cult, fantastic, pseudo-) archaeologies. Some have suggested that alternative approaches and their results must be disproved, while others have been calling for better public understanding of science. My contribution takes a different point of view. I emphasize the social and cultural needs that both scientific and alternative archaeologies address and suggest that the main significance of archaeology does not lie in the specific insights gained about the past but in the very process of engaging with the material remains of the past in the present. Critical understanding and dialogue, not dismissive polemics, is the appropriate way to engage with the multiple pasts and alternative archaeologies in contemporary society.

## Keywords

Alternative archaeologies; public archaeology; relativism; archaeology in contemporary society.

Archaeology is an academic subject that enjoys both a tremendous popularity and direct competition from a wide range of ‘alternative’ approaches to the past and its remains. By alternative archaeologies I do not mean those approaches that, although significantly different from and ‘at odds’ with the mainstream, are nevertheless being advanced from within academic archaeology (see, e.g., Dowson 2000). Instead, this essay is about those versions of the past advanced by outsiders and usually dismissed by professional archaeologists as ‘fringe’, ‘cult’, ‘fantastic’ or ‘pseudo-archaeology’ (e.g. Cole 1980; Williams 1991; Harrold and Eve 1995; Feder 1999; Andersson and Welinder 2004). Although it is impossible to generalize about the wide variety of existing alternative archaeologies, compared to professional archaeology they tend to operate within different discourses and often address other audiences (Schadla-Hall 2004).

## Crusades

Some professional archaeologists have suggested that nothing is more important than proving such alternative archaeologies and their results wrong. In this vein, Francis McManamon, Chief Archaeologist of the United States National Park Service, recently stated that ‘the distortion of archaeological interpretation by looters, misdirected hobbyists, some developers and different kinds of charlatans is a great concern to all in the field’ (McManamon 2000: 5). He argued further that ‘pseudo-archaeologists’ and their ‘misguided interpretations’ must be challenged, and with almost evangelical fervour demanded that professional archaeologists ‘must develop effective means of spreading accurate interpretations of the ancient, historic and recent past based upon scientific archaeology’ (McManamon 2000: 6; see also Feder 1999; cf. Denning 1999: ch. 2.). For McManamon and others, it is only the scientific discourse followed by professional archaeologists which leads to valid insights about the past. Others are welcome to assist the professionals but need to learn first the ‘proper’ ways (and beliefs) of science generally and of archaeology specifically. Although consequences of actions motivated in this way may in some cases be very positive, I argue that their underlying aim and strategy are problematic and ultimately damaging for archaeology.

A recent issue of *Archaeology* magazine (May/June 2003) featured a special section on the ‘Seductions of Pseudoarchaeology’, advertised using the slogan ‘Atlantis and beyond: the lure of bogus archaeology’. Editor-in-Chief Peter A. Young stated in his editorial that this section was there to help viewers to ‘distinguish between good archaeology and the “alternative” variety’. Turning to the section itself, I found the tone adopted by main author Garrett Fagan, an Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient Mediterranean Studies and History at Pennsylvania State University, astonishing. Views about the past that do not sit well with his own fairly narrow, scientific approach are dismissed as ‘ideologically driven pseudoscience’ usually drawing on certain mythic motifs, such as ‘The Vindicated Thinker’ who embarks on a quest ‘tackling some terrific mystery or secret of the past’ and finally emerges as the hero who brings sensationalist news that requires ‘rewriting the history books from page one’. Fagan’s contribution is followed by the top-five TV programmes in the categories ‘Best’ and ‘Worst of Television Archaeology’, where the worst programmes present various controversial arguments advanced by alternative archaeologies and the best programmes are all dismantling such arguments, in particular the search for Atlantis.

In my view, this is an example of opinionated and patronizing popular science writing that is damaging archaeology’s constituency in society. Readers are addressed by dismissive rhetoric and seemingly arbitrary value judgements reflecting personal preferences. What exactly is a ‘distortion’ of archaeological interpretation or ‘bogus archaeology’, as opposed to one based on the ‘proper’ study of archaeological remains? Which criteria are to be applied to judge TV archaeology? On what authority is anybody entitled to divide up their fellow citizens into categories such as ‘charlatans’ and ‘misdirected hobbyists’? Surely such judgements, as they are socially negotiable and subject to change over time, tell us more about the person making them than about the people addressed or should I say insulted.

## Controversies

The issues at stake are directly connected to some of the biggest theoretical disputes of our age among philosophers and sociologists of science (among others), concerning the status of scientific knowledge. Is knowledge gained through the currently valid procedures of the sciences necessarily superior to knowledge gained in other ways? Are scientifically informed statements always more true or useful than others? To put the same question differently:

‘What is the reason for reason?’ asks the enquiring but cynical young mind, faced with the inclusiveness and apparent irrelevance of much current archaeological scholarship on the one hand and, on the other, the vision of a past when men walked in harmony with Nature, possessed powers since blunted by industrialisation, capitalism and urban living, were guided by forces we can no longer perceive, and, *in extremis*, solved problems and initiated change with the help *deorum ex machinis* (the space sort).

(Fowler 1977: 189)

Many meters of books and articles have been written about the validity and usefulness of scientific knowledge. Their authors include many prominent scholars such as the philosophers Paul Feyerabend (1924–94) and Bruno Latour (b. 1947) (Holtorf 2000; Latour 1988). One cannot easily discern a clear outcome of these discussions, either regarding the sciences or regarding the humanities. But the fact that even now everything is still at stake and that there is no clear answer to the question about the status of scientific knowledge is perhaps revealing enough of the fragile underpinnings of the latter.

Many professional archaeologists, who are perhaps not sufficiently familiar with these more theoretical discussions in other disciplines, seem to believe that people will be better off accepting current scientific theories about the past. But even in archaeology notions of science have been fundamentally challenged, most notoriously by Shanks and Tilley (1987). It has been demonstrated:

- that academic papers which are peer-reviewed might as well be chosen by chance to achieve similar standards (Rothwell and Martyn 2000),
- that the link between the sciences (*Wissenschaften*) and state education is inherently undemocratic (Feyerabend, see Holtorf 2000),
- that academic knowledge is constructed in the present and not directly related to past realities, but follows fashions and changes according to larger political, ideological and academic trends (see Wilk 1985; Rusch 1987; Shanks and Tilley 1987: part one),
- that the existing interest in the past may have less to do with genuine curiosity and more with a need for people to distinguish themselves by affirming values and attitudes associated with established ideals of the educated middle classes (Schulze 1993: 142–50).

When Peter Fowler, Professor of Archaeology, discerned that the ‘pseudo-study’ of archaeological sites and topics presents ‘an increasingly attractive model of the past to the disillusioned, anarchic element in the outlook of modern society’ (1977: 188), I feel

compelled to rejoin that maybe academic archaeology, in turn, presents an attractive model of the past to the still believing, obedient element in the outlook of modern society. There can be little doubt that the attractiveness of different archaeological approaches to the past to any individual person is to a large extent dependent on his or her education, social background and overall value system.

### Convergences

It can occasionally be observed that academics who see the status of their own work threatened by competitors from the alternative ‘camp’ resort to ideological fundamentalism and verbal violence. This is unfortunate since professional and alternative archaeologies ultimately resemble each other more than some might like to think, and occasionally they are difficult to keep apart. For example, some enigmatic scholars such as William Stukeley (1687–1765), Margaret A. Murray (1863–1963) and Marija Gimbutas (1921–94) have been seen as significant ancestral figures on both sides of the division (cf. Eller 2003). Another case in point is the field of archaeoastronomy, which was once considered the playing field *par excellence* of alternative archaeology. Now the University of Leicester employs a Professor of Archaeoastronomy (Clive Ruggles). Both the subject matter studied, sometimes even the methodology adopted and the kind of narrative finally presented can be so similar that a separation between alternative and professional archaeologies becomes very difficult indeed. Consequently, they deserve the same standard of critical evaluation. Both types of archaeology can even share some of the same narrative threads and argumentative visions (Denning 1999).

Moreover, there are mythological overtones to the entire scientific enterprise, and especially so to scientific archaeology (Williams 1990; Zintzen 1998). Some of its mythic elements closely resemble those of alternative archaeologies. Ever since Heinrich Schliemann’s quest for Homer’s Troy archaeologists have taken steps to publicize their own work in similar moulds, whether this was in terms of the first American or of ‘the missing link’ between humans and apes. The ‘Vindicated Thinker’ is a powerful motif in many popular accounts of archaeological science, such as those that can be found in *National Geographic* and other popular science magazines. Often, leading scientists seem happy to describe themselves in such terms. What is more, local newspaper reports frequently refer to archaeologists’ claims that the local history will have to be ‘rewritten’ in the light of new excavations.

If all of these motifs are shared between scientific and alternative archaeologies, arguably both fulfil a similar social demand of providing the present with larger historical perspectives and narratives. This aim is served well by mythic quests of heroes struggling with adversity and by spectacular conclusions about novel histories. There are professional archaeologists who appear to resent the fact that some alternative archaeologists are particular good at telling such stories, whereas the professionals sometimes find it difficult to connect to larger audiences. As Peter Fowler (1977: 189) noted, if an ‘unarchaeological’ approach is more successful in producing what society hopes to gain from archaeology than ‘archaeology itself’, professional archaeologists have reason to be very worried. The situation will not be improved by providing dubious rankings for the ‘Worst of Television

Archaeology'; the only true remedy for professional archaeologists is to try harder at practising a socially and culturally meaningful archaeology themselves.

In the final analysis, the significance of archaeology may lie less in any specific insights gained about the past than in the very process of engaging with the material remains of the past in the present. Archaeological readings of the landscape enrich the experience of inhabiting or visiting a place. Those readings may well be based on science but even non-scientific research contributes to enriching our landscapes. Whatever approach is followed, the subject of archaeology brings several potent and popular themes together (Holtorf 2005, forthcoming). Archaeological fieldwork invariably involves a quest for treasure below the surface. Adversity is overcome and discoveries are made, allowing the archaeologist to piece together a story. Eventually, the hero returns from the field and reveals a profound truth that challenges existing knowledge. These evocative terms and narrative elements, although usually employed as figures of speech rather than literal descriptions, distinguish archaeological practice and, I suspect, make it so appealing.

The material and processual dimensions of archaeology have been overlooked at times by the professional archaeologists who tend to present themselves as (pre-)historians or anthropologists mostly concerned with gaining specific, intellectual insights about the past. Yet the process of doing archaeology is arguably more exciting and ultimately more rewarding than its actual results (Holtorf forthcoming). Incidentally, emphasizing methodical human inquiry and idealizing persistence in adverse circumstances is also closely related to the spirit of the Enlightenment and thus the modern scientific worldview. As Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729–81), one of the intellectual fathers of the Enlightenment, put it:

If God were to hold in his right hand all the truth and in his left the unique ever-active spur for truth, although with the corollary to err forever, asking me to choose, I would humbly take his left and say: 'Father, give! For the pure truth is for you alone!'

(Lessing 1778)

In other words, even modern society might benefit from inquiring minds more than from passive students to whom factual knowledge is taught, however much that knowledge consists of 'pure truth'. We are thus well advised to encourage any inquiries about the world and not just those that resemble the methods and practices favoured by the scientists of our time. I therefore advocate a commitment to multiple approaches and values simultaneously brought to bear on archaeological landscapes, sites and objects, whether by professional archaeologists or others. Approaches that formerly seemed very distinct thus converge into a single, shared project and engagement. That strategy resembles to some extent the line taken by Barbara Bender regarding the various meanings of Stonehenge (Bender 1998).

### **Contexts**

Occasionally we might want to remind ourselves of the truism that every past is the construct of a particular present-day context. Professional archaeologists share their

fascination with and commitment to the study of the past and its remains with many others. Different visions and experiences of the present constitute a range of contexts in which the past and its remains are given meaning. It is hardly appropriate to complain that people who are not professional archaeologists themselves may hold badly informed views of professional archaeology and have aspirations to interpret the past in other terms than those (most) professional archaeologists would prefer. Instead these views and aspirations are significant in themselves: as different manifestations of a widespread fascination with both the past and archaeology.

What is required is an attempt to engage constructively with popular and alternative interpretations of the past and its remains. As some realized a long time ago (Cole 1980), we need to get to grips with the very mechanisms that make some accounts and approaches locally more significant and influential than others. We need to understand better the specific contexts from which, in each case, the fascination for a particular approach to archaeology and the resulting interpretations of the past emerge, and appreciate the (maybe changing?) social and cultural needs to which they respond (cf. Michlovic 1990). In other words, alternative archaeologies ought to be appreciated for what they *are* rather than for what they *are not*.

At the same time the implications and consequences of each approach and interpretation need to be scrutinized. All accounts are not *equally* valid or legitimate (Lampeter Archaeology Workshop 1997; Schadla-Hall 2004: 268). Certain viewpoints which some of us may feel compelled to refute and dismiss others will see a strong need to respect and defend, each reaction based on specific values and personal choices. It matters whether somebody speaks as descendant, moral being, citizen or religious believer, whether he or she trusts most a popular leader, the Old Testament or Karl Marx. One and the same approach to the past, for example in terms of an exclusive nationalism, originating from orthodox religion, or based on historical materialism, may be dismissed out of hand by some and highly respected by others. For evaluating different versions of the past and their impact it is essential to understand the local contexts which they reflect and within which they originate. Similarly, when conflicting interpretations directly compete with each other, all local sensitivities need to be carefully studied and pragmatic solutions found that allow peaceful coexistence.

### Consequences

Professional archaeologists differ from others who are interested in the past in so far as they carry out a profession which is, as such, socially valued – whether that means to administer a museum collection, to manage commercial excavations or to teach students, among other occupations. Although these responsibilities do not relieve archaeologists from practising their profession in socially and culturally meaningful ways, intellectual crusades are not required for making a positive contribution to society. Archaeologists do not serve as a special state police force dedicated to eradicating interpretations that are considered false or inappropriate by a self-selected jury. Neither students nor other audiences should be indoctrinated with a particular version of the past or an exclusive approach to its proper study. I cannot see any good reason why non-professionals should

not be welcomed into the large project of archaeology, and why they should not be encouraged and supported in their own specific encounters with archaeology, whether these may closely resemble professional attitudes and preferences or not.

Critical understanding and dialogue, not dismissive polemics, is the appropriate way to engage with the multiple pasts and alternative archaeologies in contemporary society. That would take nothing away from professional archaeology as it exists and create added value (e.g. Eller 2003). Committed and informed dialogue brings about mutual appreciation and the possibility of working together in studying past remains and rendering landscapes (more) meaningful. From this perspective, it is not a disadvantage, as John Cole claimed (1980: 23), but an enormous advantage that archaeologists are ‘dealing with a subject many people feel they understand already’. The true danger does not lie in the epistemological relativism inherent in my proposition but in the indefensible absolutism that is the alternative.

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