Environmental Archaeology: The End of the Road?

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In December 1998, I organised a session as part of the Theoretical Archaeological Group (TAG) conference held in Birmingham, England. It was entitled 'Environmental archaeology: Meaning and Purpose'. Having spent most of my career up to that point as a practitioner of what I had become used to regard as a branch of archaeology, I was feeling increasingly constrained by it. I felt an urgent need to stimulate a debate on the issue – what is environmental archaeology, and is it really of any use? The session generated interest beyond my imagination! Throughout the day the room was packed with people, many forced to sit on the floor, and others were not even able to enter the room. Several excellent papers were presented, and the discussion was lively and, at times, even rather fierce. The proceedings of the session were eventually published (Albarella 2001), though the book was unfortunately put on the market by the publisher Kluwer at an extravagantly high price, which limited its distribution. Nonetheless, it does seem to have left a mark, however small, and the interest in the topic seems to have been rekindled in recent years. Ben Gearey, Suzi Richer, Seren Griffiths and Michelle Farrell organised a session at TAG (Bradford) in 2015 to celebrate the 15th year of publication of the book. The session, entitled ' "Humming with cross fire and short on cover…" Revisiting and reflecting on Environmental Archaeology: Meaning and Purpose', featured a few of the original contributors but also many new researchers. Then there is this book, edited by Evangelia Pişkin, Arek Marciniak and Marta Bartkowiak, which has a different ethos, but also revisits some of that debate.

Predictably, the parameters of the discussion have changed in the last 15 years, though not as much as one might have expected. New elements have emerged, some of the old problems appear to have been partly resolved, but quite a few sticking points of the past have proven to be resilient. Pişkin and Bartkowiak provide a valuable

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summing up of the development of environmental archaeology set within the history of archaeological thought. That history gives us the insights we need to understand the challenges that an interpretation of environmental archaeology has today.

One area where there has been definite progress concerns the greater integration of different areas of archaeology leading to a more comprehensive understanding of past human societies. Biological and geological studies today tend to contribute more to core archaeological questions than was the case in the late 1990s. Although problems of communication within archaeology still certainly exist, it is now more likely to see conference sessions, books and even journals, jointly tackling social and ecological issues. Even greater advances have occurred in the world of education and training, and, consequently, many younger researchers have moved well beyond some of the unhelpful categorisations that characterised past approaches. The quest for integration, promoted for many years by several visionary researchers (e.g. Butzer 1982; Luff and Rowley-Conwy 1994; O'Connor 1998), has produced results.

Such advances must, however, be interpreted within the context of developments in archaeological theory and the variable fortunes of various schools of thought. Like fashion clothing, intellectual trends tend to develop like self-enhancing energy systems, until they reach a point of absurdity, which is when their decline becomes inevitable. This is what happened to post-processual archaeology which, initially developed from a very reasonable suggestion not to interpret human societies in a mechanistic way, ended up becoming a caricature of itself in the 1990s and, as a consequence, lost influence. Post-processualists tried to recycle themselves as 'cultural archaeologists' (e.g. Hodder 2000), thus presenting a new challenge for archaeological integration. If there was an archaeology that dealt with 'culture', was there another archaeology that operated in a different sphere? And what was it? Perhaps the 'environment'? Had a new niche for environmental archaeology been created? Fortunately, few fell into this trap, and in fact 'cultural archaeology' never really took off. The times had fortunately changed, and the discipline as a whole had matured.

Yet, as soon as some of us felt that the 'struggle' had nearly been won and that the artificial separation between culture and environment could finally be regarded as a thing of the past, some of the so-called environmental archaeologists have started defining themselves as 'social archaeologists' of various kinds (e.g. social archaeobotanists, zooarchaeologists, geoarchaeologists, etc.; see references in Pişkin and Bartkowiak). The implication of such choice is that mainstream 'environmental archaeologists' do not deal with 'societies' and 'social issues'. This is incongruous and an inadvertent attempt to throw us back to the day when the nature-culture dichotomy raged.

To understand the organisation of human societies is one of the aims of archaeological investigations of any kind, and it relies upon any type of evidence. It represents an important thematic investigation, no differently from environment, landscape, settlement, religion, trade and mobility – all key subjects in archaeology. There is therefore nothing wrong for archaeobotanists or zooarchaeologists to declare a special interest and/or focus in the understanding of social structure as part of their investigations. This is different, however, from proposing the existence of a subdiscipline appositely dealing with social issues. This would, by default, imply

that other archaeologists, or environmental archaeologists, do not have equal rights to investigate societal organisation. The attitude is potentially discriminatory and takes me back to the core point of my 2001 contribution – namely, that the main issue of the fragmentation of archaeological subdisciplines has to do far more with academic status than with a genuine intellectual debate.

As Thomas (2001) pointed out, there is a logic to the existence of archaeology branches such as archaeobotany, zooarchaeology and geoarchaeology, as these are defined on the basis of the materials they study (plants, animals and soils). The ability to analyse such remains requires specific training, and therefore it makes sense that specialists in such areas are created. This is not the case with broader concepts such as society and environment, which represent thematic investigations that should be the subject of study of *all* archaeologists. Although it is perfectly understandable for a pottery specialist not to have the expertise to identify plant remains and for a zooarchaeologist not to be familiar with stone tool typologies, all these researchers cannot possibly afford to ignore key issues in archaeology such as economy, environment, society and religion. We must all engage with these subjects, which is why there should be no room in modern archaeology for environmental, social, let alone cultural, archaeologists.

Environmental archaeology not only does not have its own study material, but it cannot also be classified on the basis of its methods and theories. None of those can be restricted to just one area of archaeology, and, in fact, they often need to look well beyond archaeology to embrace more general approaches to scientific investigations. To regard environmental archaeology as the branch of archaeology that investigates the relationship between people and nature – a possibility that Pişkin and Bartkowiak are prepared to discuss – would mean to accept that human societies operate outside, rather than as part of, the natural world. Archaeology studies the material remains of our past, and everything that past humans have made and managed comes from nature – the animals they kept and hunted; the plants they grew and foraged; the stones used to make walls, houses, objects and statues; the clay turned into ceramic, floors and buildings; and the metals extracted to make weapons, decorative objects and other tools. The relationship between humans and the rest of the natural world is not one aspect of archaeology but rather the essence of it. To confine it to a branch of archaeology means to accept the position of humans outside the realm of nature, its superiority over other beings, and agree that our role is to make nature operate to our service, rather than adapt to planet-wide ecological forces.

I have seen no evidence in the last 15 years that could persuade me to change the view I held in the late 1990s. The main purpose of my book was to deconstruct the concept of environmental archaeology and to investigate ways in which different areas of archaeology could operate together more harmoniously. I do appreciate the effort to revitalise environmental archaeology in a new light, but I believe that the issue we have been grappling with in the last couple of decades has not been confined to mere semantics, but has a lot to do with the essence of archaeological interpretation. I have admired the seductive parallel between the ‘rose’ and ‘environmental archaeology’ mentioned at the end of Pişkin and Bartkowiak’s paper, but I must admit that I find it unconvincing. Unlike the rose, who we all know what it is, despite ignorance about

the origins of the name, in the case of environmental archaeology, we know perfectly well what the origins of the term are, but, despite much debate, we are still unsure about what it is and whether it really represents anything worth of note.

'Environmental archaeology' is the product of a misunderstanding of what archaeology means, as well as the position of humans in the world of nature. It is time for it to become confined to the history of research. It has fulfilled an important role, but also generated confusion, and it no longer represents a valid or useful interpretive tool. It is time to move on and aspire to an archaeology diversified in its skills and approaches, but fully integrated in its questions and aims.

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