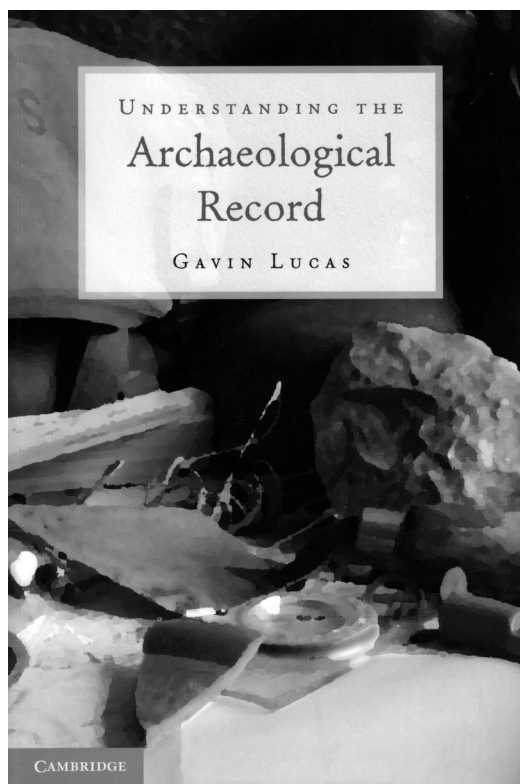


Gavin Lucas: *Understanding the Archaeological Record*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2012.



The motivation behind Gavin Lucas' *Understanding the Archaeological Record* is the author's dissatisfaction with the ever increasing gap between archaeological theory and practice. According to Lucas, this problem has plagued archaeology since at least the 1960s and is still with us today.

Sometimes an archaeological theory just does not work on the archaeological data, sometimes a theory is so vague it can work on any data. Lucas points out that this 'interpretive dilemma' is one of the hazards of any line of archaeological interpretation (p. 2). One example of this is the often-tedious case study in which no clear connection between the data presented and the theory employed can often be seen. The theory remains vacuous in respect to the data, and ultimately the data and the theory remain incommensurable. Lucas' book is ultimately about whether the theo-

retical and methodological discourses share any common ground. In doing so, Lucas issues the ultimate archaeological question: what is the relationship between the material archaeological record and the process of acquiring data on the one hand and our theories about the data on the other. Instead of exploring the relationship(s) between theories and practices by concentrating on some theoretical traditions, Lucas approaches the problem by concentrating on one of the most obvious connecting points between theory and practice, the archaeological record itself.

Lucas acknowledges that it is somewhat problematic to separate theory and practice in this sense but he has one very good reason to do so. The theoretical discourse changes very rapidly, whereas the methodological tools in contrast remain somewhat unchanged (p. 4). Lucas does not want to reinvent a middle-range theory by targeting the relationship between the material archaeological record (data) and our explanations for the processes that produced that record (theory). Lucas' objective is rather to take a look at the ontological relationship between methodology (archaeological practice) and interpretation. This is an updated version of the old interpretive dilemma which, I think, issues the problem from a somewhat neorealist point of view. Lucas is well aware of the fact that, even when stripped of all theoretical bias, scientific practice affects the archaeological record in various ways. This is one point that he issues in his book by steering between naive empiricism and (naive) social constructivism (p. 5). For Lucas, the archaeological record remains constructed in the sense that there are countless different operations going on that affect the level of fragmentation of the archaeological material from chemical and microbial processes right down to our involvement and the varying practices of science (p. 215, 231).

Today we would be hard-pressed to deny this view, but this has not always been the case in archaeology. A major part of *Understanding the Archaeological Record* is therefore comprised of a historical review of how the archaeological record has been understood throughout the history of archaeology. Personally, I found this aspect one of the most interesting and fruitful upshots of the book. By carefully re-examining the history of

archaeology, and most importantly by avoiding simplistic and overarching generalizations, Lucas succeeds in showing the reader that some of our most familiar historical narratives may not be accurate.

Lucas begins by exploring how in the 19th century the subject matter of archaeology included not just material remains and artefacts but oral traditions and customs as well as written records, which were all understood as past monuments. The history of archaeology until the 1950s can be characterized as total archaeology where the objective was to collect all the evidence of past human activity. The incompleteness of the archaeological record was not thought to be due to incompleteness of the record, but rather about the incompleteness of the collection. The idea was that as long as archaeologists kept collecting data, it would eventually add up as a whole. Theory, although it was not called that, was thought to present itself in the end. At the beginning of the 20th century with the increasing amount of archaeological finds the focus shifted from trying to collect the total record to securing a selective record. The light in which the record was seen remained, however, heuristic (finding and collecting the objects), as opposed to issues of preservation and survival, which does not enter the picture until a lot later in the middle of the 20th century.

Lucas provides an interesting historical example of how some archaeologists at the beginning of the 20th century favored an approach of total recording while others saw it as an impossible task. Two of the most prominent British archaeologists of the time (the latter part of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century) were General Pitt Rivers and Flinders Petrie. According to Lucas (p. 47) Pitt Rivers was an inductivist (or naive realist) who thought that archaeology should strive for securing the total record. According to Pitt Rivers 'it ought at all times to be the chief object of an excavator to reduce his own personal equation to a minimum' (as quoted by Lucas, p. 45). Petrie, on the other hand had a more modest objective. Petrie realized that no matter how hard we try and how much data we gather, we would be left with no more than a statement about the past, a reconstruction of it.

Even though Pitt Rivers and Petrie wrote in a very similar fashion about the preservation of detailed facts in the material record, it is clear that their ideas about the nature of knowledge differed

greatly. The reason that led these archaeologists to adopt such different archaeological attitudes was that whereas Pitt Rivers was mainly conducting excavations on prehistoric sites in Britain, Petrie worked extensively in Egypt. Needless to say, the amount of artefacts Pitt Rivers had to deal with in Britain was significantly smaller than that dug up by Petrie in Egypt. Although this may not be the only reason Pitt Rivers' and Petrie's views differ from each other, it is a very simple example of how the 'material nature of archaeological practice ought to be intimately connected to its conceptual nature' (p. 49). By such examples Lucas' objective is to keep the theory of archaeology deeply rooted in the material itself. By the same token, this is also Lucas' answer to the interpretive dilemma.

During the first half of the 20th century the understanding of the reasons behind the incompleteness of the archaeological record shifted from the representativeness of the collection to its level of preservation. Archaeologists became concerned with the need of source criticism (p. 51), which found its way to Central European archaeology from history. At the same time, however, a similar development took place in Anglo-American archaeology where the focus shifted to formation processes. Interestingly Lucas points out that had Anglo-American archaeology adopted the Central European idea of source criticism in the 1950s, the distinction between archaeological theory and practice would not be so clear in Anglo-American archaeology today (p. 60).

In addition to differing ideas about the need for critical interpretation, source criticism and formation theory saw the archaeological record from a totally different point of view. Whereas source criticism, as Lucas characterizes it, tends to approach the past from the present, formation theory tends to think of the archaeological record as the end point; the future of the past (p. 74). In discussing how formation theory has developed in archaeology, Lucas takes up such concepts as palimpsest, assemblage, and stratigraphy. As much as Lucas uses these in exemplifying how they convey the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record, he seeks to remind us about the degree to which these phenomena are ideal and constructed.

Lucas divides the archaeological record into three parts, or meanings of the term. 1) archaeological record as material culture/environment (something that is meaningful in the present for

the present), 2) archaeological record as residues of the past, and 3) archaeological record as constructed. As archaeology has recently become more about studying the recent past, it is hard to distinguish between material culture and residues. What sets archaeological record as residues apart from archaeological record as material culture is that it is fragmentary enough to catch the attention of the archaeologist. This defines the third sense of the term, archaeological record as source material or evidence, but actually governs all aspects of the archaeological record. Whereas archaeological record as present material culture (1) stimulates the archaeological imagination, archaeological record as residues (2) or evidence (3) deals more with the fact that it is possible to reconstruct the past to a certain degree. Therefore the first meaning deals with the aesthetic aspects of the archaeological record (the archaeological record as an aesthetic experience), whereas the second and third remind us of the instrumental nature of the archaeological record; how to reconstruct (or 'reconstitute', p. 14) the past ('former whole', p. 14) using what is present to us in the present.

The most important sense in which Lucas understands the archaeological record is that it is essentially fragmentary. Therefore the process of understanding the archaeological record becomes an interplay of material fragments (pretty much any material fragment), past events (objects for Lucas are events, p. 186), theoretical archaeological objects (the society for example, p. 189), and our explanatory hypotheses. This of course begs the question of what fragmentation is. Rather than making a futile attempt at trying to answer the mind-bending question whether everything that ever existed still exists, Lucas points out that things are fragmentary because they always remain to a certain extent 'quarantined' (p. 214). This reminds me of Graham Harman's view of objects as withdrawn from relations. As a result, all relations are of a translative nature for Harman. Lucas' view is somewhat similar. For him, such quarantining is what not only makes things fragmentary but makes them possible in the first place. It is 'the condition of creating stability in an otherwise continuous flux of assemblages' (p. 214). Archaeological practices for Lucas indeed owe to their translative nature. Lucas points out that it is not beneficial to think of the archaeological record or archive as a sample or a representation of the real past, but rather as a translation (p.237). The translation then

is affected for example by our choice of research methods. In this sense Lucas acknowledges that whatever methods we use, we are bound to affect the object being studied. Archaeology therefore should not be a pursuit for objectivity in the naive empiricist sense, but should rather be understood as a process of mutual engagement.

In the final chapter of the book, Lucas issues an apology for his archaeology in the fear that it might appear too post-anthropocentric to some readers. Archaeology for Lucas, however, is ultimately about the human (p. 265). Stressing the nonhuman actors which humans have become increasingly entangled with ever since the emergence of our species, Lucas admits that humans may not always be the most important factor when explaining past events. He likens his approach to some strands of ANT (actor-network theory) and OOO (object-oriented ontology), which both emphasize the cyborgial and entangled nature of the relationship between humans and other materials. Lucas, however, does this in an astute manner and is able to avoid the pitfalls of philosophical categorization. Because archaeology studies the human history, archaeology is by definition posthuman. Regardless of the recent attempts in humanities to dramatically alter our understanding of what it is to be human, the human is and will remain an essential part of archaeology.

Understanding the Archaeological Record is well written and issues some of the most fundamental problems of our discipline. Lucas' subtle writing style is very welcoming for even those readers who are not that familiar with the intricacies of the history of archaeology. The book is not, however, only about the history of the archaeological record, as Lucas not only describes what archaeology was like in the past, but also provides an account of what some more current trends in archaeology are and how archaeologists engage with their materials. The book therefore has a certain quality to it that would warrant its role as compulsory reading for all students of archaeology.

Marko Marila
marko.marila@helsinki.fi