

INSOLL, TIMOTHY. *Archaeology: the conceptual challenge*. 144 pp., bibliogr. London: Duckworth Publishers, 2007. £11.99 (paper)

This is a little book but it packs a big and important message. Its aim is to examine critically the fundamental concepts that we use to interpret archaeological materials. Insoll's concern is how we unselfconsciously impose conceptions shaped by the present on to the past in ways that preclude accurate interpretation. His task is to explore the unacknowledged limitations on our ways of interpreting in hopes of engaging more profitably with archaeological evidence. Insoll's ultimate concern is to 'increase the range of available interpretive possibilities' in archaeology.

Separate chapters are devoted to questioning our scales of analysis, our notions of time, the contemporary cultural contexts that shape our conceptions of reality, and our current relationships with the natural world. In each of these chapters Insoll discusses how the conditions of modern life conceivably desensitize us to 'the key elements that once structured human existence'.

Chapter 2 questions whether, as citizens of a rapidly globalizing world that is unprecedented in its scale and interconnectedness, we can truly understand the 'small, prescribed, and circumscribed places' within which the ancients lived. He also considers the material culture that flows through these modern global networks. Given the extraordinary abundance of objects with which we surround ourselves, are we able truly to appreciate environments where material possessions are few, curated, repeatedly repaired, or procured from afar only at great cost?

Chapter 3 takes aim at phenomenological methodologies, querying whether we can truly understand the meaning of cold, heat, dark, hunger, and dirt given the 'comfortable

ontologies' of today. Insoll reaffirms the point that all sensory experience is 'embodied' and suggests that we cannot even be certain that the assumption of similarity from *Homo sapiens sapiens* today back to early modern forms is valid. He includes a nice section on the role that smell and sound were likely to have played within ancient social life. He is also good, like various post-processualists before him, on the concept of death. Today death is technologized, medicalized, and compartmentalized, whereas it was once a much more central, intimate aspect of past domestic life. Chapter 4 continues this line of questioning by considering, among other things, how the modern emphasis on literacy and text desensitizes us to the value of oral tradition. Insoll alerts us to the likely importance of the 'aural dimension' in giving meaning to rock art and other symbolic images.

At issue in chapter 5 is our conception of nature. Insoll explores some already well-covered ground about how humankind's modern distancing from nature affects archaeological interpretation. He suggests that what might seem 'wild/dangerous' to us could have easily been considered 'home/safe' to the ancients. Insoll also questions whether the wild can be constituted by landscape alone, without its accompanying plant and animal inhabitants. For him, 'the farther removed we are from direct experience of plants or animals the less "nested" in complexity our interpretations will become'.

These are just a few examples of the interrogations Insoll invites in his effort to remind us of how archaeological interpretation is constrained by contemporary experience. Although he complicates archaeological interpretation, he is optimistic. In his concluding chapter 6 he champions a 'critical realism' that assumes a real, knowable past but accepts that our interpretations are always socially constructed. He casts this position as a 'third way' that moves beyond positivism and postmodernism. Insoll singles postmodernism out for particular criticism, and this is where a reader may take exception. In contrast to Insoll, I think the positives of the postmodern intervention in archaeology clearly outweigh the negatives, and that the discipline has been generally well served by this intervention. I do not see Insoll's advocacy of critical realism as being much different from the advocacy of other archaeologists for 'third ways' that move us towards more nuanced positions of 'mitigated' or 'guarded' objectivity. In other words, the concerns of the critical realist have not really been neglected within the field. Although Insoll

and I might differ in our appreciation of postmodernism's influence, we certainly agree about the knowability of the past and the need to expand the possibilities for interpretation in archaeology.

In short, Insoll provides good service with this book. We need to be continually vigilant about the concepts we use in interpreting the past. We have heard this advice for a number of years – indeed, it is the legacy of a 'critical archaeology' – but it is always good to be reminded of it. Insoll reminds us in a way that he also intends to be clear and jargon-free. Mission accomplished on both counts.

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