

Book Reviews

Philippe Boissinot. *Qu'est-ce qu'un fait archéologique?* (Paris: Editions de l'Ecole des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2015, 367 pp., 20 figs, pbk, ISBN 978-2-7132-2503-1)

The title of Philippe Boissinot's book, *Qu'est-ce qu'un fait archéologique?* (What is an Archaeological Fact?), poses an apparently naive question that overlies a complex ontological one. In seeking to answer it, Boissinot interrogates archaeological reasoning and epistemology from an ontological point of view, scrutinizing the 'archaeological fact'.

Thus, this work can be linked to the 'ontological turn' in archaeology, and in the humanities more generally, which started about fifteen years ago. Ontological debates in archaeology mainly focus on what 'material evidence' is or what a 'thing' is, and on 'materiality'. Discussions are inspired by the work of scholars from a variety of academic fields, such as philosophy, physics, and sociology (e.g. Karen Barad (2007), Bruno Latour (2005)). According to Christopher Witmore, ontological concerns are key to archaeology, since archaeologists currently find themselves within 'an immense project of metaphysical renegotiation [...] a movement away from the common ontology, where the past exists apart from the present, toward an ontology where pasts are spatially coextensive' (Witmore in Alberti et al., 2011: 897). Bjørnar Olsen and colleagues explain that there are several ways to understand and study archaeology as a 'discipline of things'. One of them is 'centered upon what it is that archaeologists do' (Olsen et al., 2012: 3). This is the perspective developed by Philippe Boissinot in this book. Whilst not at the centre of the main argument put forward, the work covers issues and reflections related to

archaeological 'things'. Boissinot is mainly concerned with what is known as 'mereology', a branch of philosophy (analytical ontology) that studies the relations between parts and wholes, and its use in understanding what archaeologists do. Webmoor views mereology 'as a materializing logic of modernity' (Webmoor, 2013: 107), related to the metaphysics of the composition of individuals. In mereology, 'parts may be added to understand a singular whole [...] the reliability of knowledge acquisition begins with breaking complex wholes into assimilable constituents' (Webmoor, 2013: 107). This is how Boissinot proceeds to unpack all things archaeological.

Qu'est-ce qu'un fait archéologique? is composed of twelve chapters, punctuated by twenty figures including images and diagrams illustrating its contents. After emphasizing the 'different perimeters of archaeology' in relation to epistemology, sociology of sciences, and historiography (Fig. 1), Boissinot's work especially focuses on the 'ontology of space' and the 'ontology of time', through two basic questions which cover a broad variety of themes and topics throughout the book: what is in here? (*qu'est-ce qu'il y a ici?*), and what happened here? (*que s'est-il passé ici?*) Each chapter in this book appeals to several philosophical, linguistic, sociological, and metaphysical questions in order to outline the process of creation of 'archaeological stories', from the first ontological step of observation in excavations to the interpretation of remains. Chapters 1 to 4 question the definition of archaeology, its ability to produce knowledge (Ch. 1, *Une pratique*

savante sur des agrégats’, and Ch. 2, *L’extension du domaine de l’archéologie. Vers l’actuel et la philosophie*’), and its practical and methodological enquiries (Ch. 3, *Mise au jour. Qu’est-ce qu’il y a ici?*’, and Ch. 4, *Exhumer fait preuve de l’existant*’). Chapters 5 to 9 deal with several reflections on how archaeological ‘stories’ can be produced. They question the use of analogy in archaeology (Ch. 5, *Embrayer vers ce qui s’est passé ici*’); what is an ‘archaeological theory’ (Ch. 6, *Ni simple déblaiement, ni enquête policière*’); and how to understand ‘collectives’ and identity (Ch. 9, *Appréhender des collectifs*’), in using concepts such as agency, *‘chaîne opératoire*’ (Ch. 7, *À la quête d’agents rationnels*’), and acculturation (Ch. 8, *Déplacements et contradictions. Acculturations et religions*’). Chapters 10 to 12 take an interest in the context of production of archaeological stories, which means reflections about space and landscape (Ch. 10, *Archéologie dans l’espace*’), the three kinds of archaeological sources, i.e. remains, texts, and pictures (Ch. 11, *Les trois sources: traces, images et textes*’), and ‘archaeological time’ through its continental three-way split between prehistory, ‘proto-history’, and history (Ch. 12, *Préhistoire, Protohistoire et Histoire*’).

Although a Lecturer in Archaeology at *L’École des hautes études en sciences sociales*—in fact this book stems from his HDR (*Habilitation à diriger des recherches*) dissertation—Boissinot graduated in theoretical physics. As he admits (p. 317), his approach can be regarded as a preliminary mereological exploration of archaeological remains through several philosophical and anthropological concepts, an extensive overview illustrating the significance and the utility of theorizing in archaeology, which is still quite rare in France. This is why this book is of interest to students and professionals alike, since everyone will certainly be able to find some ‘food for thought’, whatever their specialization and their professional background.

Above all, the author’s assessment concerning the consistency of archaeology as a ‘discipline’ seems more relevant than ever after reading this book. This issue was the subject of a conference and a book edited by the author in 2011, which gathered an eclectic range of contributions by several archaeologists and social anthropologists (Boissinot, 2011). In the book reviewed here, and as put forward in a previous article (Boissinot, 2014), the author underlines that archaeology is not independent. In Chapter 4, he marvels about the opportunity to study all material culture within the same disciplinary matrix, archaeology, while the conditions of observation may vary greatly (p. 109). Indeed, studying material culture necessarily requires the cooperation of a variety of other scientific disciplines in order to produce knowledge. Besides, the necessary interdisciplinary approach of archaeology should not be taken for granted, but ‘unpacked [in order to see] how it prefigures relations between practitioners’, as Webmoor (2013: 108) emphasizes. Thus, Philippe Boissinot’s book questioning the ‘archaeological fact’ is directly related to the author’s approach, initiated some years ago, aiming to call archaeologists’ practicalities and ambitions to mind and to examine their collaboration with researchers of other scientific fields in order to produce a true ‘archaeological knowledge’ (pp. 71–76).

Boissinot proposes the use of the word ‘aggregate’ (*agrégat*), a key concept deployed throughout the book, to define an archaeological site. According to the author, this term allows one to understand the nature of an archaeological site as ‘an accumulation of things which could have their unity for themselves but which have not necessarily been thought as a totality’ (p. 29, my translation). Moreover, an aggregate is an archaeological site when one of its parts is an artefact, and not just a constitutive element (p. 106). Boissinot also points out that one of the main characteristics of an aggregate

is that it does not convey any overall point of view but is a 'remnant of the reality' and not a 'disjointed presentation' of it (p. 256, my translation). According to him, 'an archaeological fact is an attempt to link an object with properties by the uncovering of the aggregate' (p. 80, my translation).

Boissinot's use of the term 'aggregate' can be directly related to the interesting thoughts offered by Yannis Hamilakis and Andrew Meirion Jones about the use of the concept of 'assemblage' (Hamilakis & Jones, 2017). Perhaps the term 'aggregate' allows more consideration of archaeology, not just as a discipline studying material culture, but as consisting more broadly of 'disassembling aggregates'. Actually, Boissinot's wish is to legitimize archaeology as a 'science' amongst humanities through the concept of 'aggregate' (Chs 1–2). His position thus clearly is engaged with, and can be linked to, Johannes Siapkas and Charlotta Hillerdal's (2015) reflections on archaeology as an 'empirical discipline' in what has come to be known as 'empiricism 2.0' or 'neo-empiricism'.

Interestingly, Boissinot applies the term 'aggregate' to describe burials, which are also understood as *ensembles clos* (closed contexts) (p. 256). Even without questioning the validity of the latter notion, it seems unfortunate that the author does not apply his mereological reasoning to mortuary remains. According to him, burials 'are concrete wholes, to the extent that all objects were buried together and that their assemblage refers to a certain unity of thought at one time' (p. 256, my translation). But the 'closedness' of any burial is always questionable, it is never entirely certain, and a grave can be reopened for various reasons. Additionally, even if we consider a primary grave containing a single body, and without any trace of 'reopening', all objects may not have been buried simultaneously. Bodily ornaments and garments, worn by the deceased, must be differently examined. Thus, the idea that a burial is an

ensemble clos should be reconsidered, since it prevents consideration of the entanglement of the different 'levels of individualization' (p. 214), dear to the mereological approach.

The absence of the archaeology of death in this book is quite surprising, especially since it covers a wide variety of archaeological topics and issues. Obviously, the author could not write about all aspects of archaeology and he does refer to mortuary settings and funerals occasionally in Chapters 8–10. But his approach aims to present several different ontological approaches to 'aggregates' in order to think about 'archaeological facts'. In that way, all research themes and issues related to the body as material culture (Sofaer, 2006) and the ontology of the body, including Karen Barad's (2007) works, would have deserved to be considered, because they are more relevant than ever within archaeology and anthropology.

Somehow, the structure of this work resembles that of two French archaeological handbooks (Demoule et al., 2002; Djindjian, 2011), also quoted by the author. However, while these two books are centred on purely methodological issues (i.e. excavation methods, data processing, etc.), Boissinot's book, while addressing some methodological aspects (e.g. the Harris matrix), mainly focuses on theoretical issues that, as mentioned above, have already been discussed in the United States, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavia but have only been quite recently introduced in France.

Philippe Boissinot's book represents one of the (too) rare works written in French to take part in theoretical debates that are currently underway in other countries, but which struggle to take place in France. It reminds archaeologists about the necessary renovation of research topics, analyses, and interpretations. As the author underlines in the concluding chapter, current topics can get bogged down in issues arising from the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century because they have not been

sufficiently criticized or reviewed, such as identity concerns in many non-Anglo-American disciplinary contexts (p. 317). Finally, this book highlights the need to give back meaning to French archaeological practice, which has been damaged by the overspecialization of archaeologists, and the organization, time, and budget constraints of salvage archaeology (p. 7).

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Robert Chapman and Alison Wylie. *Evidential Reasoning in Archaeology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016, 254 pp., 19 illustr., hbk, ISBN 978-1-4725-2527-7)

In times when archaeological theory seems to largely revolve around different -isms about how to approach material culture—from post-colonialism to the new materialism—it is refreshing to read a book which grapples with the nuts and bolts of archaeological reasoning. As Chapman and Wylie point out, despite the collapse of the processual-post-processual wars of the 1980s and early

1990s, epistemological issues of knowledge production have not been resolved so much as buried underground. Theoretical pluralism may reign on the surface, yet the tacit consensus of knowledge being not-quite-relative yet not-fully-objective either, probably survives only through lack of scrutiny. The acceptance by processualists that data is always theoretically laden, while for