

Archaeology and Aboriginal Sovereignty Approaching Time, Radiometric Dating, and the Deep Past

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Overview

Archaeology has a long history of entanglement with colonialist thought and practices. The field developed during the height of European global political, economic, and intellectual dominance in the 19th and early 20th centuries. It has been characterised as an expression of Western, positivist thinking and a linear understanding of time and history. However, in recent decades, archaeology has transformed itself into a much more diverse discipline under the influence of Indigenous rights and self-determination movements. The field has also been embraced by many Indigenous communities, and its results are often used concerning questions of Indigenous sovereignty. This recognition acknowledges archaeology's potential to make visible traces of past human actions beyond written records and human memory. The ability of modern radiometric techniques to date past actions across hundreds of thousands of years has often provided enhancements to Indigenous authority. While these developments allow archaeology a more positive position in the relationships with Indigenous communities, they generally underestimate the complexities of radiometric dating techniques in archaeological reasoning and the generally undertheorized treatment of time within the field. In this poster, I want to explore the vexed issue of the relationship between modern archaeological notions of time and the integration of the latter into debates about Indigenous sovereignty. The insights presented have important consequences for future debates about humanity's deep past and Indigenous sovereignty. Indigenous communities need to be cautious about embracing archaeological notions of time, and archaeological practitioners must be mindful of the complex assumptions on which their treatment of time rests. However, because of archaeology's multidisciplinary strengths and its positioning across the humanities/science divide, the discipline has great potential to support Aboriginal sovereignty and the aspirations of Aboriginal people in an informed and responsible fashion.

Chronopolitics and archaeology

Traditionally, archaeology has employed a linear and universal understanding of time, which allows the placement of objects and events along a single progression that moves inevitably from the past to the future. However, such an understanding is a huge simplification of the intertwined nature of past and present processes and events. It does not fully capture the personal experience of time and is not in agreement with many Indigenous conceptualisations of time. The history of archaeology in Australia and elsewhere has shown how archaeological practices and findings can be both empowering and disempowering for Indigenous people. Notions of time and how they are employed play an equally crucial and underestimated role in these contexts. Notions of time are impacting the ways in which people define themselves and how they view their place in the world. Identities are defined with reference to real or imagined past events and persons. As such, archaeological practice and its results participate in significant current processes of Indigenous and national identity formation, and it can equally support and undermine them. From these insights, important challenges and responsibilities for the discipline emerge that can have far reaching political implications.

Time in archaeology is created by decisions that are being made in the present. It is important to remember that the archaeological record does not belong to the past. It exists in the present. Its interpretation depends on contemporary definitions, orientations, and distinctions. The treatment of time in archaeology is part of the more extensive politics of the imagination of the past. As such, it is subjected to the social power dynamics of the present, or a 'chronopolitics', as described by archaeologist Christopher Witmore. These processes continue to affect virtually all aspects of archaeology, and they exist in complex relationships with wider political developments. The interpretation of archaeological evidence is never neutral. It is, therefore, important to examine how archaeological evidence is given significance in the present, how it is transformed into different forms of heritage, and how it is embedded into meaningful narratives.

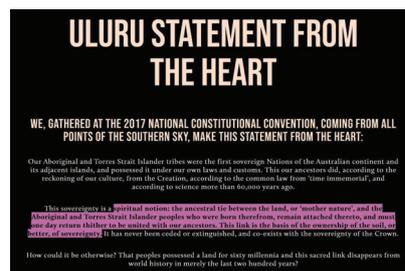
Archaeology is not so much the study of the (deep) past. It is, as archaeologist Laurent Olivier argued, the study of the materiality and temporality of the present: "A site or an artefact is never wholly contained within the past. It is a product of a dynamic past-present continuum and, as every historical process, its study is affected by considerations of the future". The decisions and motivations related to different representations of the past are a product of implicit or explicit political decisions, which can be understood as expressions of the chronopolitics of archaeological reasoning.

Over the last few decades, Archaeology's role in nation-building projects has been analysed extensively in the context of recent European history. The respective interrelationships between political actors and interests on the one hand, and academic or intellectual projects on the other, show how history and notions of time can be manipulated for a range of purposes. For example, the practice of dividing the past into periods and phases is a mechanism that is common in both the fields of history and archaeology. But it is not an innocent or neutral endeavour. Periods ascribe evidence meaning beyond their local contexts or relationships and this is ultimately a political act that is entangled in power relations - and which can be difficult to challenge. These aspects become particularly significant in colonial or imperial contexts in which the power difference between colonizer and colonized groups, for example, is pronounced on many levels.

Archaeology, Aboriginal sovereignty and the politics of time

Considering the arguments presented above, it is important to ask: Do archaeological discoveries support or undermine Aboriginal sovereignty? For example, the earliest securely dated in-situ rock art in the Kimberley or the oldest securely dated ceramics found in Australia on an offshore island of the northern Great Barrier Reef? Most archaeologists would certainly argue that these discoveries help Aboriginal sovereignty and aspirations, because they allow Aboriginal people to claim an appropriate place in the great narrative of humanity's ascent and progression, especially because they have been denied such a recognition over more than 200 years. As such, Aboriginal people can counter the perception that their past was less complex and that it included significant technological advancements and achievements. However, it is also the case that these advancements and achievements are defined and assessed against a Eurocentric version of history that is materialistic and technocentric, which is reflected in the examples that are often being put forward (oldest bread-making, oldest stone houses, oldest agriculture, oldest engineering, etc.). These are the contexts in which significant intersections between power and time occur.

Archaeological research can play an important role as long as it is realised that the engagement with the dimension of time continues to be undertheorized and that we are, in fact, dealing with a multiplicity of temporalities when we engage with archaeological evidence and Aboriginal heritage. Archaeology can embrace these temporalities, which are, in fact, already implicit in many Indigenous archaeology projects that are focused on local priorities and social justice. This will require a change in perspective and a more thorough engagement with Indigenous forms of knowledge production and reproduction, which are place-based, local, relational, and mediated by Indigenous stories. Following the considerations put forward throughout this book, such a change will also necessitate questioning the temporal or historical logic of the current dominant discourse. Support for Aboriginal sovereignty based on temporal sovereignty could potentially transcend the chronopolitics of settler-colonial policies and its popular narratives. Such a movement can only be achieved if time is not understood as an "an abstract, homogeneous measure of universal movement along a singular axis". The past needs to be thought of as a multiplicity of temporalities and varied temporal formations with their own rhythms. These can be particular to single contexts or can intersect at different scales. In this way, temporalities can continue to reflect locally significant relationships and patterns of contingency without being erased by universally imposed processes and developments.



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Conclusion

Because of its continuing shift away from humanities approaches and towards the natural sciences, archaeology often presents its results only in the form of data and as seemingly objective. However, archaeologists need to be aware of the ways in which their practices produce and reproduce persistent (and often colonial) historical narratives. Archaeology needs to engage with the epistemological challenges of how meaningful stories can be inferred from material and other evidence. It also must be mindful of the influences and legacies that impact these processes and how archaeological narratives interact with the public imagination. With its many multidisciplinary strengths and its positioning across the humanities and science, archaeology must be involved in contemporary discussions about the relationship between scientific, historical, and Indigenous approaches towards the deep past of the continent, with an awareness of its own role in shaping ideas about time and temporality. Only then can archaeology support Aboriginal sovereignty and the aspirations of Aboriginal peoples in an informed and responsible fashion.

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