Time and the Archaeological Record

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In this presentation I want to explore the relation of time to the archaeological record through the concept of contemporaneity, specifically through two major issues. The first concerns how we understand contemporaneity in our narratives of the past. When we say two buildings were contemporary, or site A is contemporary with site B, what do we really mean? I will suggest that it is crucial we distinguish a simple notion of contemporaneity from a more complex one; the first defines objects as contemporary insofar as they occupy the same slice of time, while a more complex understanding foregrounds the relationality between objects themselves, not between objects and an envelope of time. The advantage of the latter is that it permits imbrication, that is temporal overlapping. Keeping imbrication to the fore also provides a critical lever on what we can and cannot say about the past as it forces us to consider what objects we can realistically deploy the term contemporary to.

The second issue concerns the common exclamation that the archaeological record is a contemporary phenomenon; as archaeologists we may write about the past but the resources we use are objects in the here and now. This point was used by Binford for example to stress the contemporary nature of our observations and understanding and to distinguish it from contemporaneous written sources where they exist. However the point has also been used more recently by Rodney Harrison to question the very idea of archaeology as a discipline concerned with the past, especially in terms of period research. Drawing on archaeologies of the contemporary past, Harrison has critiqued the modernist outlook which has to convert the present into a past in order to study it; by flipping it around however, all pasts become in effect, archaeologies of the present. However, in focusing on the temporality of the archaeologist and their practices, what is ignored is the temporality of things themselves. More generally, what contemporaneity really means is once again sidestepped or taken for granted. Drawing on the history of archaeology and conceptions of the archaeological record, especially the role of two different metaphors - the fragment and relic, I want to consider the idea of archaeological remains in terms of 'survivals'. Such an approach will also have implications for archaeologies of the contemporary past.

In ending, I will explore the connections between these two issues and the ideas of imbrication and survival in order to push discussion of the concept of contemporaneity even further along. Arguably all that has been established through these ideas is a tighter yet purely formal articulation of the concept of the contemporary. But in order to give it more substance, it needs to be connected to questions of causality and agency. My final thoughts will draw on the concept of consociality coined by the phenomenologist Alfred Schutz to reflect further on what it is we mean, when we use the term contemporary.