Who the Devil Can Endure It? Archaeology, Science and the Fact Fetish

Tim Flohr Sørensen

In this paper I am going to discuss the current proliferation of archaeological orientations towards science. While the use of scientific methods and results have never really been absent from archaeology, varying archaeological agendas and ideals have implied different valorisations of science in the service of archaeology and/or as integrated part of the discipline. This is probably most pronounced in the collisions between processual and post-processual archaeologies in the 1980s and 90s. Even though archaeology of the post-processual conviction was critical of the alleged dehumanisation of past societies with the positivist dispositions of scientific research designs, science never disappeared from archaeology and is of course also widely applied as a tool – rather than an epistemological ground – by many scholars associated with the post-processual inclination.

Even though archaeology never abandoned science, the discipline has, over the past decade or so, increasingly exploited and been subject to the many significant developments in scientific methods in its pursuit of obtaining more and increasingly detailed information about the past. Some scholars characterise these scientific developments as a quantum leap in the possibilities for understanding the archaeological record, allowing archaeology to access hitherto unattainable knowledge of the past, and to verify or reject old hypotheses and interpretation.

I wish to offer a critique of how science is currently consumed in archaeology, arguing that the revitalised dominance of a scientific research design leads to a fetishisation of ‘data’, ‘facts’ and quantitative methods that may in fact be threatening to the pluralism and heterogeneity of the discipline. Limiting the diversity of archaeology also means limiting the ways in which we ask
questions in archaeology and our ways of understanding what purposes archaeology may serve, compromising the academic potentials of archaeology. I suggest that for archaeology to realise its full potential, it must revitalise its methodology for asking questions pertinent to the humanities.

In order to address this issue, I am going to take issue with what I consider to be the core condition of archaeology: traces. I am going to suggest that traces have lost their power as vehicles for theorisation in archaeology in the latter half of the 20th century, where the notion of the trace has been made synonymous with notions of scientific ‘evidence’ and ‘clues’; similar to how traces are perceived in semiotics, in forensic science, in Freudian psychoanalysis and in crime novels. I argue that this way of understanding traces as standing for something else, as a sign of past events or symbolic of some kind of meaning, is basically responsible for arresting traces as scientific proof of something outside the trace itself or representative of the true meaning behind of the trace. In short, archaeology has basically lost its interest and, more importantly, trust in traces themselves in the course of processual positivism as well as post-processual hermeneutics.

Through a specific – although brief – example, I am going to argue in this paper that there may be an alternative to the mistrust of traces and to the authority of evidence in archaeology. For this alternative to make sense, we need to consider what we mean by knowledge and to reflect on how we want to understand archaeological traces; to consider what we ask traces to do for us. And here I imply that traces can do other things for us than yield factual information about what happened in the past. I suggest that this potential can only be achieved by embracing the ‘dark matter’ nested in traces, thus accepting the unknowable as unknowable, and by sustaining the mystery and strangeness of traces.