The Trouble with Theory

The New Interpretive Dilemma

Every once in a while, archaeological theory gets a bashing. In the 1980s, in the wake of nearly two decades of new archaeology and its progeny, many started to believe that archaeological theory had devolved into methodology for its own sake. James Moore and Arthur Keene, editors of a 1983 volume which attempted to reappraise the role and status of archaeological method, were critical of the way archaeology had borrowed methods and models from outside the discipline with little thought about whether they were actually viable with the aims of archaeology (Moore & Keene 1983: xiv). They were also especially critical of the way methodology, best exemplified through the growth of middle-range theory, had become increasingly detached from a theoretical base. Two decades later, Michael Shanks launched another major criticism of the direction postprocessualism was heading, in the way it was all too easily drawing on the writings of major French poststructuralists without proper concern for the way it connected to archaeology. ‘Where is the archaeology?’ he asked (Shanks 1990: 294). Whereas processualism was borrowing methods without thought to theory, postprocessualism seemed to be borrowing theory without thought to method. It appears, then, that the potential for a schism between theory and method has been a recurrent concern within...
understanding the archaeological record

archaeology, at least since theory became an explicit subfield of archaeological discourse in the 1960s, if not earlier. Such concerns are still with us today.

In a recent polemical piece for the journal *Archaeological Dialogues*, Matthew Johnson suggested that there was a real disjuncture between theory and practice – between what we say in theoretical papers and what we do in practice (Johnson 2006: 118). He identified various forms of this lack of correspondence, but the one he singled out was the undertheorization of the link between overt theory on the one hand and other elements of archaeological thought and practice on the other hand (ibid.: 120). Johnson took two examples to explore this, agency theory and phenomenology, which he argued revealed opposing trends. Thus, in the first case, practical applications were argued to be resistant to agency theory because basic archaeological concepts like culture, phase, and type worked against any easy incorporation of the theory. In the second case, it was the opposite problem – the uptake of phenomenology found an all-too-receptive audience in British archaeology because of its strong fieldwork tradition, such that adopting the theory of phenomenology was largely a question of terminological change without any substance behind it. Although one might disagree with Johnson’s diagnosis in these particular cases (see, for example, the responses which follow the paper), no doubt most of us can relate to his general point: sometimes a theoretical approach just does not work with archaeological data, and sometimes a theory is so vague that it can work on any data.

Johnson’s point can perhaps be restated as the hazards faced by any archaeological interpretation: vacuity and incommensurability. One could even see this as the contemporary version of the interpretive dilemma which plagued archaeologists in the 1970s and 1980s (DeBoer & Lathrap 1979; Wylie 1989). That dilemma, one may recall, invoked the opposition between a safe, yet dull description of the archaeological record (artifact physics) and a more speculative, yet exciting interpretation. It was based on a certain naive view of the relation between theory and data which has since been superseded (e.g. Wylie 1992b), a relation in which the entire burden rested on the role of evidence. The current dilemma – if one can call it that without sounding overly pessimistic about archaeological theory – is also based on the relation between theory and data (the updated postpositivist version), but here
the burden falls squarely on theory. It is no longer a question of whether the evidence supports the theory: does the theory work in the context of the evidence? The classic symptom of this malaise is the case study, as when an empirical piece of research which is intended to illustrate a theoretical argument fails; the contemporary literature abounds with such instances, and no doubt we would not be hard pressed to find examples in which the case study simply does not live up to expectations raised in the theoretical part.

Admittedly, the difference between these versions of the interpretive dilemma is subtle, and in fact the opposition between theory and data, though still meaningful at one level (see e.g. Hodder & Hutson 2003), needs to be rethought. Indeed as Tomášková suggests in her reply to Johnson, theory is a practice too, and she alludes to other divisions of labour within archaeology, such as that between fieldwork and laboratory work (Tomášková 2006: 166). Turning this back onto the updated version of the interpretive dilemma, we might say that the hazards of vacuity and incommensurability arise not so much because of a lack of correspondence between theory and practice and/or data but because of a disjuncture between the metaphysical assumptions of different practices or discourses. In a way, the change might also be characterized in terms of a shift from a correspondence between theory and data to the coherence between different statements. In short, the current interpretive dilemma is not an epistemological one, as that framed in the 1970s and 1980s, but an ontological one, insofar as the metaphysical assumptions framing different discourses often remain unexamined. Does the reality posited in archaeological discourse about agency theory bear any correspondence to the reality posited through excavation or through artifact analysis?

This, in essence, is what this book is about. I want to ask, What is the ontological relationship between ‘methodological’ concepts like stratigraphy and typology on the one hand and current ‘theoretical’ notions like materiality and agency on the other hand? However, in approaching this question, a difficulty emerges: although our methodological concepts are relatively few and stable, the theoretical ones are diverse and ever changing. This difference in a way expresses one of the main reasons one can still talk about methodological and theoretical concepts as distinct, even though the former are of course theoretical, whereas the latter are operational – hence the inverted commas around
them. Yet my point is that to attempt an analysis of the connections between these two discourses would be a massive undertaking because of the pace of change and variety in theoretical practice – too massive for any single book or perhaps author. As an alternative, I could just select some theories, as Johnson did, for comparison – but even that seems daunting, as well as somewhat arbitrary. Instead, what I wish to do is explore this problem in terms of a very confined and specific discourse: the nature of the archaeological record.

One could describe this as an attempt to rewrite middle-range theory but from an ontological rather than an epistemological position. Binford’s original conception of middle-range theory was to build epistemic links between what we observe in the archaeological record and our explanations of the past processes which created that record. It was his solution to the original interpretive dilemma. In this book, in accordance with the updated version of that dilemma, I thus want to explore the ontological links between our practical engagements with the archaeological record and the interpretations we produce. However, I would not insist on adopting a terminology developed during a very different period of archaeological thought – no doubt advocates of the Binfordian middle-range theory would dislike my appropriation of this term as much as those who think middle-range theory is an implausible fantasy of processualism. We can call it what we like, so long as the objectives are clear, and I hope they will become so as the course of this book unfolds. Nonetheless, to give the reader some sense of direction, I want to briefly outline the structure of the argument that is presented in this book.

In approaching the question of the archaeological record, I have tacitly divided the book into two parts. The first part (Chapters 2–4) treats what I call the received view of the archaeological record – that is, how it is currently depicted and its historical background. I find taking a historical perspective extremely useful, not only for enabling a better grasp of concepts and practices which inform what we do today but also for the pedagogical value of those concepts and practices in argumentation and debate. It is also a necessary corrective to an academic amnesia that often accompanies more theoretical texts. The chapters of the first part thus each treat a different conception of the archaeological record, which though related, are essentially distinct. The second part (Chapters 5–6) then presents a reassessment of the concept of the archaeological record and attempts to respond to the
fragmentation of the concept presented in the first part – to ontologically suture what I see as critical ruptures between different domains of the archaeological record. Fundamentally, one could characterize such ruptures in terms of a broad schism between the archaeological record as something which is given (e.g. remains of the past) and something which is constituted by archaeologists (e.g. the archive). It is, if you like, an attempt to steer between a naive empiricism and social constructivism, yet to do this requires shifting from an epistemological to an ontological and operational perspective on the issue.

In this respect, the approach taken in this book bears some similarity to the work of the anthropologist-historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot (Trouillot 1995). Trouillot accepts the doubling of history as both past events and present narratives, and rather than get caught up in dichotomous thinking (e.g. past as real versus past as constructed), he focuses on history as a continuum, identified through four moments. These moments are the generation of documents, the collation of documents into an archive, the retrieval of facts from documents, and the construction of historical narrative. For Trouillot, focusing on these moments is critical to understanding the intersection of power and knowledge and how silences are created in history; to locate and contest such silences, historians need to adopt strategies which focus on these key moments. It is easy to see how the archaeological record can also be considered along these lines, and indeed Alison Wylie has explicitly connected Trouillot’s division of four moments in the production of history to comparable moments in archaeology (Wylie 2008). In the same way – but with a less political agenda – in this book I explore archaeology as a continuum by examining the nature of the archaeological operation and archaeological entities deployed in our narratives. For me, the concept of the archaeological record is an obvious starting point insofar as it connects and encapsulates the duality of archaeology as process (what we do) and as remains (the past). By way of an introduction, then, I begin with an obvious question: what is the archaeological record?

What Is the Archaeological Record?

A conventional way to answer the question ‘What is the archaeological record?’ would be to turn to some standard dictionary and quote the definitions therein of ‘archaeology’ and ‘record’ – or even better to
go to their etymological roots, in this instance, to Greek and Latin, respectively. We all know about archaeology (‘the study of ancient things’, from the Greek), but the etymology of the word ‘record’ may be less familiar. Although originally from Latin (‘to remember’), it more directly comes to us through Old French, meaning ‘testimony committed to writing’; however, since the 1890s, it came increasingly to cover other recording modes in relation to the new technologies. I am not terribly fond of dictionary definitions or etymologies, although I admit such recourse can be (and most often is) a rhetorical move to legitimize a certain approach, a fact no less true in my instance. Thus, one of the reasons I focus on the term ‘archaeological record’ is precisely because it connotes an ambiguity about the nature of archaeological evidence – as something which is its own testimony, an autoarchive (the fossil), as well as something which archaeologists testify to in the archive they produce (the text). Although superficially similar, this bears no resemblance to Patrik’s distinction of the physical and textual models of the archaeological record discussed later in this section (Patrik 1985). ‘Record’ thus evokes something of the semiautonomous nature of modern recording devices such as tapes and cameras, as well as the primacy of human agency in the production of written testimony. Nonetheless, I am aware that the term may still be problematic for some (see e.g. Barrett 1988, 2006; Edgeworth 2003: 5–6).

Perhaps more important than etymology, though, is the context and timing of a word coming into common parlance; the recurrent use of the term ‘archaeological record’ may have originally come to archaeology via geology and palaeontology, although in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a variety of terms, including both ‘source’ and ‘record’, was used interchangeably (see e.g. Newton 1851). Indeed, the transference of more broadly literary or textual concepts to characterize all histories from the earth, including archaeology, was common practice in the nineteenth century. Referring to material remains – whether fossils, rocks, or artifacts – as documents, archives, testimonies, records, and sources was a standard device, and one which remains with us today. However, the first persistent reference I find to the term ‘archaeological record’ is by Childe (1956a), but I freely admit this is not based on any systematic search on my part – although it would not surprise me if the 1950s was when the term first became more common, like the associated term ‘material culture’ (Childe 1956a;
The various meanings of the term ‘archaeological record’ were made very clear in Linda Patrik’s seminal article on the subject, published a quarter of a century ago (Patrik 1985). In the beginning of her paper, Patrik identified five different meanings used by archaeologists (Patrik 1985: 29–30; see also Table 1). The first is the material context in which past events and/or processes occurred – in short, what is variously called the ethnographic past or the systemic context. The second and third meanings refer, respectively, to the material deposits and material remains left behind by these past processes; the fourth concerns the part of these remains recovered by archaeology (i.e. the sample), and the fifth, the record archaeologists themselves create of these remains (e.g. archives, reports). It is a pity that Patrik ignores the last two meanings in her paper; nowhere does she discuss the role of the archaeologist in the constitution of the archaeological record, but rather she focuses her attention on the first three meanings. Moreover, her distinction of the physical and textual models conflates the differences among these three meanings, which I think actually aids the confusion surrounding the concept – a confusion she acknowledges at the end of the paper.

The physical model, according to Patrik, asserts that there is a causal and physical connection between past events or processes and the record itself – the prototype being the fossil record. The textual model, in contrast, asserts that the record encodes information about the past – the prototype being a historical document. Patrik’s paper was an extremely balanced and considered piece insofar as it was a review of the then-current theoretical positions; indeed it was an attempt to create a bridge...
of understanding between the rifts of processualism and postprocessualism. However, it did not really offer a constructive or different view on the archaeological record. Her concluding call for a synthesis of the two models has largely been ignored, yet it revealed an interesting schism in the concept itself:

Perhaps the two models apply to different levels of archaeological evidence: the physical model seems more appropriate for archaeological remains, and the textual model for the original material artifacts, in use and as deposits. They should be synthesized by treating one as the temporal, causal consequence of the other.

(Patrik 1985: 55)

What seems accurate about this observation is the distinction between two levels of evidence, which might be better characterized as two ontological conceptions of the archaeological record: one which treats it as comparable to a contemporary material context, yet one from another time, and the other which treats it as fundamentally historical. In other words, it is the difference between the archaeological record as synonymous with material culture on the one hand and the archaeological record as a set of remains or residues on the other hand. What is misleading about this observation however, is the ascription of the textual and physical models to these respective ontological representations. I would argue that both the textual and the physical models of Patrik’s scheme are in fact examples of the same ontology, one which sees the archaeological record in terms of material culture in a past ‘present’, and that there is in fact no model in contemporary archaeology which adequately covers the second ontology – a historical ontology of residues. This is the key theme of the second part of this book.

Despite offering a possible reconciliation between the models, a deeper sense of misgiving emerges from Patrik’s paper, and her final paragraph questions whether the concept of the archaeological record is at all useful – she asks us to consider whether ‘archaeological evidence may not form any kind of record at all’ (Patrik 1985: 56). Indeed, subsequent reflections on Patrik’s paper tended to reject either of her models as a suitable way of understanding the archaeological record.
John Barrett’s answer to Patrik’s concluding suggestion was quite emphatic in its assertion that the concept of record was inadequate and preferred the use of the term ‘evidence’ (Barrett 1988, 2006). For Barrett, the problem with the term ‘record’ is that it encourages us to see material remains as representations of past events rather than evidence of the material conditions structuring and structured by people. I have a lot of sympathy with Barrett’s position, but as I have already articulated, I think the concept of record can be thought of in more complex ways (see also Thomas 1996: 55–64). Indeed, the problem is not really about the utility of the concept of record but rather about the recognition of the ontological constitution of archaeological remains qua remains, not as something else, such as material culture. This is especially ironic, as in the following year, Patrik published another paper on just this aspect, but from an art historical perspective; her paper titled ‘The Aesthetic Experience of Ruins’ is probably unknown to most archaeologists (Patrik is a philosopher, not an archaeologist), but it addressed the importance of the fragmentary and incomplete nature of antique art to its aesthetic appreciation (Patrik 1986). It would have been interesting if she had considered the fragmentary nature of the archaeological record in relation to its status as historical evidence; indeed, the notion of incompleteness is something which takes on great significance in Chapter 2. However, the immediate point I wish to emphasize is that, in articulating these two models, Patrik felt the need at the end to invoke her original five meanings of the archaeological record – or rather the first three. Yet it is the full list which is important, because it clearly shows that the concept of the archaeological record can – and perhaps ought to – entail both the physical remains themselves and the work archaeologists perform on them to constitute them as archaeological evidence. This is a theme that is central to this book and consequently results in a very different view to the one that Patrik gave in her otherwise stimulating paper.

I begin by redrawing up Patrik’s original list and condensing it to just three meanings, which also form the basis of the following three chapters (Table 2). The first refers to the archaeological record as composed principally of material culture or the human material environment. In short, this is the archaeological record conceived of as material culture or artifacts, in the broadest sense of the term (see the next section) and is equivalent to Patrik’s first meaning. The second meaning
Table 2. Three Meanings of the Archaeological Record as Used in This Book Compared to Patrik’s Scheme

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<tr>
<th>Patrik’s Fivefold Division</th>
<th>Threefold Division Used in This Book</th>
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<tr>
<td>Past objects and events</td>
<td>Artifacts and material culture (Chapter 4)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Material deposits</td>
<td>Residues and formation theory (Chapter 3)</td>
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<td>Material remains</td>
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<td>Archaeological sample</td>
<td>Sources and fieldwork (Chapter 2)</td>
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<td>Archaeological record</td>
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refers to the archaeological record as the remains or traces of a past material environment, and here I discuss both her second and her third meaning in terms of an oppositional tension – between deposits and assemblages in relation to formation theory. The third and final meaning refers to the archaeological record as something we encounter and construct in the present, and once again, the tension here is between Patrik’s fourth and fifth meanings. I want to elaborate on each of these in a little more detail before I treat them more fully in their respective chapters.

**Artifacts**

When we think about the objects that archaeologists deal with – their immediate object of study – a central notion is that of the artifact. ‘Artifact’ can mean just small and/or portable objects made and used by humans, although the term is also more generally employed to cover any material object or construction, such as a pit or a building. Textbooks, however, are also quick to point out that the archaeological record is composed not just of artifacts but also of a variety of non-human objects, such as seeds, bones, and soils, which are commonly called ecofacts (for a typical example of such a discussion, see Renfrew & Bahn 1996: 45–6). However, the distinction of ecofacts from artifacts is a little spurious – seeds and bones have in many cases been used by humans and even modified (i.e. domesticated), and more generally, almost all such remains have been influenced by or are associated with human action in one way or another; otherwise, archaeologists would not be interested in them. Indeed, the artifact-ecofact distinction is really a manifestation of a deeper culture-nature dichotomy which has been under constant critique for decades. Nonetheless, there is a
clear sense in which humans occupy the key position here in defining the limits of archaeological stuff; archaeologists do not dig for dinosaurs – despite what a portion of the misinformed public might believe. Notwithstanding the fuzziness of this boundary of the human, there are places and times where humans simply do not exist and, therefore, neither does the archaeological record. We can call the objects in these places and times nature if we like, but given how loaded that word is, it might be better to rethink our terminology.

Extending the concept of the archaeological record to include ecofacts does, however, raise the issue of the historical contingency of which objects fall under its umbrella. Certainly, in the nineteenth century, many archaeologists did retrieve what we would call ecofacts today, such as animal bones and seeds. But equally, the range and diversity of such ecofacts have undoubtedly increased, especially since the 1950s, under the influence of environmental research in archaeology, not to mention ecofacts becoming a more integrated and standard part of retrieval policies. Yet although some parts of the archaeological record have expanded, others have conceptually contracted, especially the catholic attitude of the antiquarian, whereby effectively anything and everything relating to the past fell within the domain of archaeology, including folklore and manuscripts as well as church buildings and Roman pottery. However, despite the historically contingent nature of which objects fall under the term ‘archaeological record’, in contemporary terms the overwhelming connotation is that one is dealing with physical things but things connected in some way to human activity. ‘Artifacts’ is one word used to describe these things, and another phrase is ‘material culture’, although neither quite captures the full diversity of objects studied today, probably because they are essentially nineteenth-century constructs. One gets a sense of this in the recent move away from discussing material culture in favour of the more open term ‘materiality’, which captures something of this tension between physical matter and human behaviour.

Residues
However, even in contemporary terms, not everyone would agree with equating the archaeological record with material culture but would prefer to add the temporal qualifier: past material culture. Archaeologists used to ignore all objects which postdated medieval times, but
since the latter half of the twentieth century, the chronological limits of the discipline have been pushing ever closer to the present, and for many, there is no chronological boundary any more. Despite this, many might implicitly still draw a line between archaeological and non-archaeological material culture based on some random distance from the present, usually connected to a spurious argument about having access to better sources (e.g. documents). I do not need to rehearse the fallacy of such arguments here (see e.g. Lucas 2004). For some, artifacts become archaeological only if they are more than a century or more old; for others, yesterday’s garbage is archaeology (Rathje & Murphy 2001). In effect, this makes archaeology almost synonymous with material culture studies, irrespective of time and place.

This broad definition has some merits insofar as it is extremely difficult to draw a line between conventional archaeological objects and more contemporary objects – aside from the obvious fact that all archaeological stuff is contemporary in one sense. Yet even under this definition, for some there is still a distinguishing feature of the archaeological record which would not place all contemporary material culture under its purview; this distinction is not about age or time elapsed or even accessibility to other sources but about whether or not the material in question is part of an active, living context. In short, what makes objects archaeological is that they are dead. Of course the problem with this view is, What constitutes a dead context? Is yesterday’s garbage dead? It has certainly been ejected from one context (the household), but it has also entered another (the garbage disposal system). What about when it gets to the landfill? Are landfills dead contexts? And when the landfill is closed – is it dead then? And in what sense is it dead, if biological and chemical processes are still operative? It is no doubt a fuzzy boundary, but much like the one circumscribing the limits of the human, it is also an important one which should not be forgotten. It is also one which forms the basis of the second meaning of the archaeological record: residues.

Hence, besides the use of the terms ‘artifact’ or ‘material culture’ to denote the archaeological record, another set of terms with quite different meanings have been widely used since the birth of archaeology in the nineteenth century, and even earlier. The family of terms such as ‘remains,’ ‘relics,’ ‘fragments,’ ‘traces,’ ‘vestiges’, and ‘residues’ has been employed throughout the history of archaeology but has rarely received much, if any, explicit theoretical discussion, until the
mid-twentieth century, when the first systematic work on formation theory started to appear. This took a number of different approaches, which are described in more detail in Chapter 3, but it is sufficient here to point out a distinction between, on the one hand, a strand which was influenced by environmental and geoarchaeological research, which focused on deposit formation, and on the other hand, an approach using actualistic studies to model the short-term transformations of objects as they move from the living to the dead context. The key conceptual device for this meaning of the archaeological record is a distinction articulated in numerous ways, but most familiarly by Binford’s terms of statics and dynamics or Schiffer’s systemic and archaeological context (Binford 1977; Schiffer 1972). Yet these divisions are somewhat problematic, as I have already pointed out: when does a context become static or archaeological? In a sense, no context is static, it is just dynamic in a different way, and one of these different ways is, of course, through archaeological intervention. This brings us to the third and final meaning of the archaeological record: sources.

Sources

The archaeological record, as human-related material residues, is also constituted as having a particular epistemological function as source material or evidence, facts or data; such residues may have other meanings for contemporary society and operate in other fields and practices, such as the antiquities and art market, but for archaeologists it is their status as sources that defines them as archaeological, as opposed to something else (e.g. the aesthetic). This is not to say that such fields are entirely separate – archaeology was, after all, born in part in conjunction with art history, and the links between archaeology and art have been recently revisited in the context of modern art (e.g. Renfrew 2003). The same is true more generally of the wide and diverse range of meanings that such objects or residues have in popular culture and notions of heritage (e.g. Holtorf 2005, 2007). Without downplaying the important connections between archaeology and popular or ‘high’ culture – or indeed non-Western perspectives on heritage and the past – what concerns me here is the peculiarly archaeological perception of such objects as sources.

As such, one of the primary issues surrounding sources has been their representivity; how much can or do they tell us about the past? The basis here is the recognition that the archaeological record is a
contemporary phenomenon, yet also one which derives from the past; the question is thus also of survival or of the persistence of the past into the present. Here again, the historical links between archaeology and art history are important to recognize. Aesthetic theories of the nature of ruins and fragments would have influenced a tacit archaeological sensibility, and it is useful to reflect on what Robert Ginsberg has defined as two opposing theories of the ruin: the romantic and the classical (Ginsberg 2004: 315–34). Romanticism sees the ruin as a remnant of an irrecoverable past, a unity which is forever lost – it focuses on loss and melancholy. Classicism, in contrast, sees the ruin as evidence of continuity with the past and the possibility of reconstitution of a former unity in the imagination – it focuses on the glory of the original unity and the possibilities it offers to the imagination. These opposing perspectives have been seen to permeate more generally throughout the humanist disciplines, such as philology, law, and history (Vismann 2001; on monumental, antiquarian, and critical history, see Nietzsche 1957). Vismann has suggested that where Renaissance scholars used the metaphor of fragments to evoke a lost unity, nineteenth-century historians considered the fragments real links to the past, source material for the construction of histories. It is thus the reconstitution of a former whole from fragments which determines much of the definition of the archaeological record as sources, and why the notion of incompleteness plays such a critical role in methodological and analytical procedures (e.g. Anglophone sampling theory and German source criticism).

Absent Presences

The issue of incompleteness raised in the previous section might actually be considered a manifestation of a more general property which affects all three facets of the archaeological record: absence. The idea that something is missing, a gap, pervades not only the notion of source but also residues and material culture. In the case of residues the property is self-evident – some diminution of the original, some loss which is inflected by a much more temporal quality than in the case of incompleteness: that of ephemerality or durability. In the case of material culture, the absence is subtler; it is not so much about the ephemeral as the intangible or immaterial: the mental, the unobservable,
or those aspects of objects which seem to have only a ghostly presence. The diverse connotations of absence have been recently addressed by several authors from different fields, many of which connect with the absences I invoke here (see papers in Bille, Hastrup, & Sørensen 2010). I suggest that perhaps each of these archaeological absences is in fact mutually reinforcing by virtue of the fact that each facet of the archaeological record is kept distinct. In other words, the very fragmentation and separation of the concept of the archaeological record into three different discourses, which rarely impinge on one another, actually creates the problem of absence felt in each. The only way to deal with such absences is to reconnect the domains, which is the intention of the later chapters of this book.

The idea of the archaeological record being somehow haunted by absence is expressed perhaps most succinctly in the scepticism often felt around archaeological narratives – how archaeologists manage to weave often-monumental accounts of the past from just a few scraps (Figure 1). The flip side of this scepticism is the phenomenon of the time capsule, a trend which began in 1936; current estimates put the

Figure 1. Archaeological alchemy; or, how archaeologists spin stories from scraps (drawing by Mark Lucas).
number of time capsules at more than ten thousand worldwide, 80 percent of which have or will be forgotten long before their due opening date (Jarvis 2003). Such deposits can be viewed as an implicit lack of confidence in the traces we leave of ourselves to future generations and their ability to read these traces. The irony is, of course, that such deliberate testaments are often very poor records of what we are, much worse than archaeological remains (Jarvis 2003). It should also be noted that such scepticism is just as often matched by wonder and awe at the skills deployed by archaeologists, and this is no doubt how most of us would prefer to see it. Yet this ambivalence towards what archaeology claims to be able to do, whether expressed as scepticism or as wonderment, balances on this issue of absence – the ability of the archaeologist to see what others cannot. This pervades our work at all levels; I was recently excavating some building foundations and a historian expressed her doubt over the very existence of what I took to be self-evident. She simply could not see the building. This of course is a common-enough event, and one most students go through as they learn to see layers and features on-site. But exactly the same kind of transformations are at play throughout the whole archaeological process – learning to ’see’ pottery types, to read graphs, to understand the complex networks that are involved in constructing archaeological narratives. By the time we become proficient, so much of the process has become black boxed (i.e. assumed or taken for granted) so that what to us seems self-evident, to outsiders seems magical. And magic, as we all know, can be taken either as a sleight of hand (the sceptic) or as the product of special powers (the believer).

The only way to begin to dispel this ambivalence is to try to open out these black boxes, to unravel the process of our work, a point argued for some time ago by Joan Gero and a central tenet of researchers working in the sociology of scientific knowledge and science and technology studies (see Gero 1995; see also Edgeworth 2003; Witmore 2004; Yarrow 2003, 2006, 2008). Such studies play an important role in this book, especially in Chapter 6. However, in themselves, they do not directly resolve the problem of absence as it is articulated in archaeological discourse; the only way to achieve that is to rethink the conceptualization of the archaeological record, and in such a way that it conjoins what are currently three, fragmented discourses about that record: fieldwork, formation theory, and material culture studies.
I suggest that the concept of materialization is a useful way to conjoin these domains and, at the same time, to avoid the whole issue of absence. Materialization is a process, it is never completed, always fluid; this does not rid us of the concept of absence, but it does disarm it, removing its negative connotations, because it suggests that it is a very condition of presence itself. Now all three facets of the archaeological record can be viewed in terms of a process of materialization. In the case of material culture, the key issue is about materialization and how objects come into being in the first instance. In the case of formation theory, it is about the dematerializing processes that affect objects and transforms artifacts into residues. Finally, in the case of fieldwork, we can think of the archaeological process as itself, a (re)materializing process, bringing old objects back into circulation but in very different ways from when they were made and used before deposition. The archaeological record, then, as a unity, is all about the tension between (re)materialization and dematerialization.

This characterization is admittedly a little crude, but it serves as a preliminary sketch of the intentions of this book. The new interpretive dilemma which opened this chapter is in many ways a product of theoretical fragmentation; this is not the same as theoretical plurality. I am certainly not arguing for homogeneity or a grand unified archaeological theory. Rather that, over the past half century, as theoretical discourse has expanded in ever-larger and more diverse ways, the connections among all the components of the archaeological process have come under threat of being severed. The distance between those scraps we unearth and the monumental narratives we construct has become so great, and often so black boxed, that it is no wonder that our interpretations sometimes appear either vacuous or disconnected to the data, as Johnson observed. My aim in this book is to try to begin to reconnect these components through the lens of one concept: the archaeological record.