

Sean McGrath

Dr. Pamela Gaber

ARCH 449W

Fall 2009

Cyprus: A Look into the Development of Archaeological Theory and Methods

Three major paradigms dominated archaeological thought during the twentieth century: the culture-historical approach, processualism, and post-processualism. A fourth theory, known as cognitive archaeology, arose in the 1980s with Colin Renfrew as its main proponent. Archaeologists who follow this theory seek to study ancient ways of thought using the scientific, empirical approach of processualism. Recognizing the theoretical basis of a particular excavation is fundamental for understanding the objectives its archaeologists wish to fulfill and their methods of carrying out fieldwork. In order to demonstrate the effects that theory has on the way material culture is retrieved and interpreted, we shall examine key excavations in Cyprus exemplifying the major theoretical eras. Additionally, these excavations will bring us face to face with the larger philosophical issues of archaeology, including the nature of the discipline itself.

Cyprus, throughout history, has been the meeting point of the classical and near-eastern worlds, making it of great interest to scholars of both fields who wish to investigate the cultural dynamics and interactions within the eastern Mediterranean. Although it is a place of immense archaeological significance, archaeologists have only just begun to unlock its secrets—particularly those of Roman Cyprus. One of the earliest Americans to take interest in the island's antiquities was Luigi Palma di Cesnola, a soldier and treasure hunter who looted numerous sites there during the latter half of the 1800s. He amassed a collection of Cypriot artifacts so large that the Metropolitan Museum of Art was founded nearly on it alone. Despite the damage Cesnola wrought on the thousands of tombs and other

places that he plundered, his actions did have one positive effect: namely, that of arousing interest in the island's history and archaeology (Gaber, "The History of History," 52-53).

Like so many other treasure hunters of the 19th century, Cesnola showed a complete ignorance of the most basic elements of archaeology: stratigraphy, provenience, context, record keeping, and chronology. He lived during a time in which such concepts were not well understood; only during the first half of the 20th century did archaeology develop into the scientific discipline known today and recognized for its emphasis on the meticulous recording and preservation of artifacts. Cesnola did, however, write a book about his experiences in Cyprus; unfortunately, its reliability is questionable due to the romantic nature of the narrative. He describes treasure chambers and underground passageways filled with golden objects, making the book seem more like a fictional account of some adventure rather than an objective report of his findings. One can only imagine how much more advanced the field of Cypriot archaeology currently would be if the 35,573 artifacts Cesnola appropriated had been excavated according to modern techniques (Soren and James 173-176).

In the 1930s an amateur archaeologist from the University of Pennsylvania, George McFadden, undertook the first systematic excavations in Cyprus at the site of ancient Kourion (Davis 164). Unlike Cesnola, who was little more than a treasure hunter, McFadden actually sought to understand the history of the site he excavated. However, considering that he lacked formal training, his methods seem primitive by today's standards. According to David Soren, "[McFadden] dug trenches all over the place and discovered some wonderful things, but they were cursorily drawn, almost never published, and described in only the most abbreviated way in his field diaries... he never published a comprehensive description of his finds" (29). Now, Soren's comments on this matter may seem a bit ironic, considering that he himself has yet to appropriately publish his findings from his own excavations in Kourion during the 1980s, as we shall later discuss. Nevertheless, McFadden did begin to take steps toward a more scientific archaeology near the end of his career. Tom Davis gives a more

balanced perspective: “He had just completed a good article for the AJA about his cemetery excavations the night before he drowned, so he was going in the right direction. Here his amateur stance hurt him because he never had the formal training of producing preliminary reports and end of season reports, which is how grad students learn to properly present the data.” If not for his untimely death, McFadden would have certainly continued to develop more professional methods of excavation and publication.

McFadden practiced what is known as culture-historical archaeology: he sought to excavate all of Kourion in order to gain a “total understanding of the site,” which, as Davis describes, “was in keeping with the pattern established by the major excavations in the classical world and the Levant” (165). The culture-historical approach was defined around the turn of the 20th century by German archaeologists such as Gustaf Kossinna, who sought to trace the history of his people out of a deep sense of nationalism (Trigger 235-236). The origins of the approach, however, begin with certain advances of the 19th century. Christian Thomsen created the idea of a relative chronology based on artifact typology, which led to the study of prehistory (Trigger 122). Hans Hildebrand developed the principles of systematic classification and seriation of artifacts, although he was not concerned with chronology. Finally, a Swedish scholar named Gustaf Oscar Montelius approached archaeology by synthesizing and improving on the work of these scholars. He sought to trace the history of Europe by classifying artifacts according to style, geographic location, and time period. Montelius established large assemblages of artifacts based on these classifications and looked for common themes between them in order to define particular cultures (Trigger 225-230). In turn, the definition of various cultures based on artifact assemblages led to the writing of narratives, much like those which historians create.

Franz Georg Maier, a German classical archaeologist, carried out excavations at Palaepaphos for the German Archaeological Institute under the Universities of Konstanz and Zürich from 1966-1984. The purpose of these expeditions was, as Maier describes, “to reconstruct from the earth the

history of town and sanctuary... [employing] archaeological methods to an historical end” (Maier and Wartburg 143). Palaepaphos was a place of great importance in ancient Cyprus, as it was the seat of the fertility goddess, or Aphrodite, cult. The site diminished in time with the founding of Nea Paphos; however, it retained a great deal of prestige throughout the Roman Period (Maier and Karageorghis 224-249). Maier’s work there began with an extensive site survey, “to collect, catalogue, and analyse as additional evidence all earlier finds and topographical data,” and continued with a “systematic excavation of the Sanctuary of Aphrodite” (Maier and Wartburg 143). He examined remains from the Chalcolithic to the Byzantine periods, in addition to medieval ruins in the area. Maier was concerned with the entire history of the site; rather than developing specific questions about the past and engineering his excavations accordingly, Maier simply let his findings take their own course. The obvious danger of such an approach is apparent: A project which does not start with clear, specific objectives can very easily lose focus and coherency. Compared to McFadden, Maier certainly had better field methods, thanks to the advances of the previous thirty years. However, a new archaeological theory appeared during the 1960s that would revolutionize the way fieldwork was to be conducted.

Although archaeology became a systematic discipline through the culture-historical approach, it had yet to develop a mature, scientific methodology. American archaeologists in the 1960s, such as Lewis Binford, approached archaeology as a subdivision of anthropology and began to proclaim the advantages of processualist theory. Also known as the “New Archaeology,” processualism attacked the traditional focus on cultural idiosyncrasies and historical narratives, emphasizing instead broad generalizations about cultural processes and change (Trigger 392-393). Followers of this new paradigm assumed a positivist epistemology, stressing that knowledge can be derived from the senses alone. Positivism has certain inherent difficulties, since it maintains that no one can truly learn from

the experiences of others; nevertheless, it is really a more extreme form of empiricism—a philosophical stance toward data collection, which maintains that theory should be kept distinct from method.

Positivism had a direct influence on the way archaeologists conducted research. Though followers of the culture-historical approach used scientific techniques such as C₁₄ dating and trace-element analysis, the actual scientific method of hypothesis formulation and testing did not become standard in archaeology until the advent of processualism. As mentioned above, Maier conducted site surveys and employed systematic procedures of excavation, though he followed the theoretical stance of traditional classical archaeologists. He did, however, recognize the limitations of this perspective: “Reconstructing history from the earth is a process full of methodological pitfalls; new discoveries may prove wrong tomorrow what seems plausibly established today” (Maier and Wartburg 143).

Processualists seek to answer questions about specific aspects of a given site and design their excavations accordingly, rather than simply digging and creating large compilations of data “which might not be relevant” (Renfrew and Bahn 41).

Aside from this emphasis on objective methods and clear research intentions, processualism differs from the earlier approach in its focus on explaining—not simply describing—past change. The fundamental assumption was that human behavior exhibited regular patterns; thus, the value of archaeology was seen in its ability to create generalizing statements about cultural processes, rather than narratives of specific events. By employing the deductive reasoning of the scientific method, processualists chose to be optimistic about the amount of information artifacts could reveal (Renfrew and Bahn 40-41).

From 1984 to 1987, David Soren of the University of Arizona carried out excavations in Kourion, the site at which George McFadden had worked only a few decades earlier. Kourion was once a great city located on the island’s southern coast, but was tragically destroyed in 365 AD by a devastating earthquake. The site is a fascinating place for those who wish to study the interchange

between Greek and Roman culture in Cyprus: Baths and mosaics depicting gladiatorial combat demonstrate the level of Romanization that had taken place by the 4th century, while the continued use of the Greek language and religious motifs (before the advent of Christianity) shows the retention of Hellenic customs (Karageorghis 181-197).

Although he “came to Cyprus from the classical tradition,” Soren was also influenced by his work with Near-Eastern archaeologist Lawrence Stager at Carthage in the 1970s, which led him to question the conventional methods of his own field, adhering instead to the New Archaeology (Davis). In his book *Kourion: The Search for a Lost Roman City*, Soren speaks of the problems with “‘classical’ classical archaeology,” which was concerned more with recovering artifacts worthy of display in a museum and less with what those artifacts could reveal about the past (Soren and James 72-74). He writes,

...our interest more and more is in what the unearthed object can tell us, to approach it from the socioeconomic as well as the aesthetic point of view... To excavate per se is boring and pointless, if all you are going to do is dig up more objects to be tagged and catalogued and put in display cases... the more interesting questions for us now are, What did people *do* with this thing? Exactly what went on here? (73)

Soren’s theoretical stance as a processualist shaped his scientific approach to fieldwork. Aside from designing the project at Kourion with clear objectives to answer specific questions, Soren sought to recover as much information as possible from the excavations by using empirical methods. He precisely recorded each item’s location by taking coordinates within a three-dimensional grid system, making extensive notes on the condition of its discovery, and entering all of this information into a computer database. Soren employed the expertise of various specialists, such as osteologists, botanists, zoologists, and five full-time conservators, in addition to several geologists and a seismologist, who helped determine the circumstances of the earthquake of 365. Moreover, he took advantage of

scientific techniques, including microscopic soil sample analysis and polarized light microscopy for examining fresco fragments (Soren and James 104-126).

In the concluding chapters of his book, Soren creates a historical outline of Kourion and then proceeds to describe general patterns of change at the site during the Roman period. For example, he states that drama gave way to gladiatorial combat as the preferred style of entertainment in the third century, although it later made a comeback before dying out completely as a result of the great earthquake and the spread of Christianity (Soren and James 198-199). In describing the circumstances of many burials near the site, Soren makes the statement, “As was often the case, the Hellenistic tombs were reused in the Roman era” (Soren and James 203). Soren made use of archaeological evidence both to reconstruct past events and to explain those events through generalizations about cultural change. Nevertheless, while his book broadly expresses his findings and interpretations of the site, it is not a scholarly presentation of the data. After nearly 30 years, Soren has demonstrated in this regard one of the greatest dangers of archaeology: the failure to appropriately publish one’s findings. If other archaeologists do not have access to the original data collected during an excavation, they will not be able to objectively evaluate it themselves, forever having to rely instead on the conclusions of the original excavators.

While Soren was excavating at Kourion during the 1980s, other paradigms in archaeological thought began to emerge. The *Annales* school, which actually originated in the discipline of history much earlier on and came to full bloom under the leadership of Fernand Braudel in the 1950s, began to greatly influence archaeological theory. Proponents of this stance emphasize the *longue durée*, or the long duration of time and events, as opposed to single events which change history overnight. This school of thought, although laudable for having spurred discussion between archaeologists, has so far failed to produce a coherent framework for interpreting archaeological finds, let alone practical

methods of excavation. Though this could certainly happen in the future, one scholar, Richard W. Bulliet, remains doubtful:

The *Annales* school itself does not have sufficient coherence and self-understanding to make appropriating ideas from it an easy or straightforward task.... Inter-disciplinary borrowing [between history and archaeology] is like a blood transfusion. It may give vital sustenance temporarily, but the receiver cannot depend on the donor in the long run.... There is ultimately nothing in the *Annales* school that can take archaeologists much farther intellectually than they have already gone. (131-134)

Another major paradigm surfaced in the 1980s, born out of criticism of the tenets of processualism. Proponents of this post-processual stance, such as Ian Hodder, Michael Shanks, and Daniel Miller, attacked the New Archaeology's positivist epistemology and emphasis on making broad statements about cultural processes. Bruce Trigger summarizes the primary criticism of processualism: "...there are many aspects of human behavior that cannot be accounted for in terms of universal generalizations, whether these concern behavior in general or societies at specific levels of development" (418).

Postmodernist theory has had a substantial effect on the development of post-processualism. In stark contrast with the New Archaeology and its use of empiricism and the scientific method, postmodernism rejected objectivity, adopting instead a relativist and idealist standpoint (Trigger 446). As Hodder and Shanks describe, "It is argued that objectivity is not an absolute or abstract quality towards which we strive. Objectivity is constructed" (18). While the two theories differ in other ways, such as post-processualism's emphasis on specific culture traits rather than similarities between cultures, in addition to multivocality and social issues, the greatest disparity lies in the elimination of a scientific approach to archaeological research, and hence, fieldwork. According to Colin Renfrew, the post-processual polemic is "confused and ultimately unhelpful," as the entire theory "defines itself

essentially by asserting its identity through opposition or contradistinction to an existing and productive tradition of thought and work” (4). The stance is in crisis, for, although it presents many valid concerns with processualism, it has failed to create a viable methodology.

A critique of post-processualism, in turn, began almost immediately: During the 1990s, Colin Renfrew and others outlined the next phase of processual theory, known as cognitive archaeology. This stance seeks to maintain archaeology’s status as a scientific discipline through the use of hypothesis testing and objective data analysis, but to change its goal from creating “universal ‘laws of culture process,’” to studying the thoughts of ancient peoples without becoming “palaeopsychology” (Renfrew 10). Although Lewis Binford defined three major aspects of culture with which the New Archaeology should develop specific “frameworks of inference,” including the sociotechnic, technomic, and ideotechnic dimensions, it is the last of these which most processualists and, indeed, Binford himself, have greatly neglected (Renfrew 9).

Cognitive-processualists espouse a realist philosophy, meaning that past events are assumed to have actually happened. Renfrew cautions against “an extreme positivist or empiricist position which might restrict our conception of the past to that which we can empirically learn about it” (10). Post-processualists have a tendency to equate positivism with empiricism; Renfrew himself, in this quote from the 1994 volume *The Ancient Mind: Elements of Cognitive Archaeology*, does the same. However, many archaeologists in recent years have clarified the difference, and now cognitive-processualism has actually become synonymous with empirical archaeology, as advocated by Pamela Gaber (*Idalion III*, 7). Such archaeologists stress the importance of painstaking research, excavation, and conservation methods in order to collect and preserve as much information from the material culture as possible.

Gaber, who has been excavating at Idalion since 1987, makes her theoretical stance clear in the introduction to her 2011 publication *Idalion III: Excavations on the Terrace of the East Acropolis*:

We will apply...[the Scientific Method] systematically elsewhere to our discussion of the limestone sculpture found in the 'Adonis Temenos' on the Terrace of the East Acropolis at Idalion. For now, let us just underline that it is the reality of hard data that divides the anti-processual school from the cognitive-processual school of archaeology. (7)

A proponent of Renfrew, Gaber follows his use of the term "anti-processual" in reference to post-processualism, reflecting this theory's preoccupation with criticism rather than productivity. Gaber was trained in the archaeology of the Levant under Bill Dever through the "'American method,' combining Kenyon's stratigraphy with Biblical Archaeology's ceramic focus" (Davis). Through her training, Gaber developed her processual, empirical stance, which determines her methods of investigating archaeological hypotheses as well as conducting fieldwork. She employs painstaking survey and excavation techniques, ensuring that no artifacts, including nondiagnostic pot sherds, are ever discarded. Instead, all material culture, in addition to soil, charcoal, and slag samples, is carefully catalogued and stored, so that future archaeologists may have the possibility of directly examining the evidence for themselves. Moreover, Gaber reads all pot sherds, with the exception of those found in technical loci (i.e. topsoil), in order to ensure that no details are overlooked. Archaeologists at Idalion use a tripartite system in order to gather and organize data, which includes the use of pottery buckets, locus sheets, and a written narrative of the finds. Supervisors take elevations at the opening and closing of each locus and maintain detailed notes concerning the discovery of each new artifact or feature (Pollio). The advantages of an empirical position toward archaeological techniques are apparent.

The 20th century witnessed radical changes in archaeological theory: What began as a complement to historical studies became a scientific discipline with the advent of processualism. In time, this paradigm was attacked by those who deny the possibility of objectively interpreting material remains. As with many things, however, archaeological theory seems to be cyclical: Old concepts are

constantly recurring alongside the development of new ideas, and many archaeologists who adhere to an unbroken processualist tradition continue to proclaim the importance of empirical methods in archaeological work. By examining the development of archaeology in Cyprus, from the earliest amateur excavations of Luigi Palma di Cesnola and George McFadden, to those of Franz Georg Maier, who sought to “reconstruct history from the earth,” and finally the most recent projects employing highly sophisticated techniques of artifact recovery and preservation, such as David Soren’s expedition to Kourion in the 1980s and Pamela Gaber’s continuing work at Idalion, we have observed the effects that an archaeologist’s theoretical stance can have on his or her approach to collecting and interpreting ancient remains. Despite the attempts of post-processualists to alter archaeology’s status as a scientific discipline, empiricists such as Pamela Gaber adhere to the established, objective methods which have enabled the creation of a vast body of scholarship throughout the last fifty years. As postmodern philosophy fades into the shadows of the past, a return to the widespread use of science in archaeological theory is eagerly awaited.

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