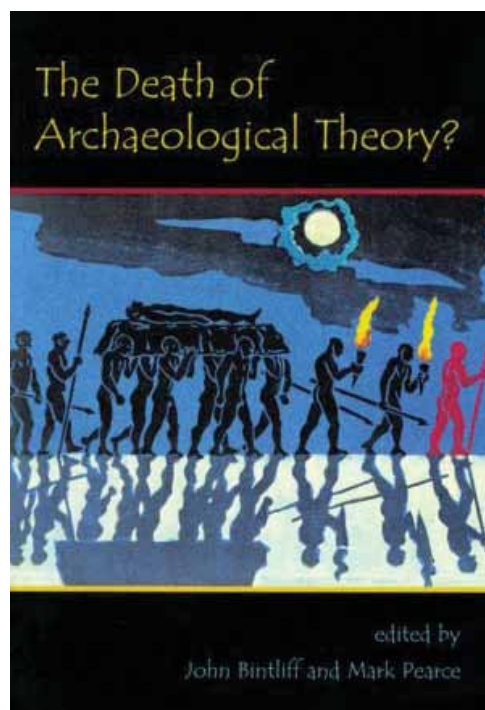


## Bintliff, J and Pearce, M. (eds.) 2011. *The Death of Archaeological Theory?* Oxbow Books, £12.95.

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The concept of the 'death of theory' originates in the discipline of literary criticism (Barthes 1967 [1977]), and was originally used to suggest that literary studies might be better off without theory. The editors of this recent volume from Oxbow Books, Bintliff and Pearce, believe that the phrase is relevant to debates about the theory of archaeology due to the influence of literary studies on post-processualist thought, and used it to stimulate radical questioning (p1) of the direction and identity of archaeological theory at a session of the 12th Annual Meeting of the European Association of Archaeologists in Krakow, 2006. The six papers in this book are drawn from contributions and responses to this session.

Bintliff and Pearce are responsible for the introduction and both the initial and final papers of the collection. In their introduction it could be said that Bintliff and Pearce are not coy about the direction they think archaeological theory should take. They give a tantalising outline of a firm proposition for changes in both our use and discussion of theory, putting forward the concept of 'eclecticism'. This draws strongly on Wittgenstein's (1953) 'toolbox' of theories where the practitioner selects the most appropriate theory available for tackling a specific problem. They also suggest a radical shake-up of the teaching of archaeological theory, substituting the usual chronological discussion of



one theory replacing another (i.e. post-processualism replacing the New Archaeology) for an approach that encourages students to view all theories critically in terms of their strengths and weaknesses.

This introduction is immediately followed by Bintliff's paper, where the author uses extensive quotations from prominent theorists to demonstrate the ingress of sometimes dogmatic *ideology* into archaeological theory, to the detriment of evidence-based methodology, multivocality and plurality in interpretation. In this Bintliff is both success-

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ful and provocative, identifying some clear personal ideologies masquerading as ‘theory’ in the work of Kristiansen (2004) and Tilley (1994). However, his utter rejection of “those that preach that a (any?) single approach or model is right to the exclusion of all others” (p20) presents us with an interesting contradiction; the ‘eclectic’ approach he espouses in the introduction could be seen as exactly this kind of singular model. Perhaps aware of this tension, Bintliff has avoided referring to eclecticism in his paper, which is an unsatisfactory development from the promising introduction.

The last paper, by the co-editor Pearce, also offers no discussion of eclecticism. Instead, Pearce looks at the way theories have risen and fallen in popularity, initially describing these cyclical changes as “the Oedipal murders of academic ‘father’, where theory is used as a weapon against the ‘old guard’ to facilitate the emergence of a new academic generation” (82). Ultimately rejecting this Kuhnian model of scientific revolution (1970), he argues for a more subtle understanding of the plural and multivocal theoretical reality occurring in UK academic archaeology right now. He positions this as evidence for the necessity of a new way of thinking about theory, saying that this potentially major paradigm shift “might be the truly revolutionary concept that theoretical paradigms are like dinosaurs – inflexible and useless, and that the future lies in a truly eclectic, theoretically open, approach to interpreting archaeological phenomena.” (87)

The tentative phrasing used in these two papers is at odds with the firm language of the introduction. There the authors almost propose a new theoretical (or, I would say, *meta-theoretical*) approach, but they hold off from fully committing to, or even fully discussing, this in their own papers. I assume that the intention of the editors was to present this volume as a set of papers explicitly linked to the original conference session, rather than to utilise this publication as a platform for their theoretical position. If so,

the introduction would have required some tempering to achieve this successfully.

Of the contributing authors’ papers, the first is by the established US archaeologists Flannery and Marcus and is the only one to explicitly respond to what they describe as Bintliff’s “polemic” (p28). They use a pair of case-studies to emphasise the importance of anthropology as a source of theory for much of (US) archaeology, and respond to the ‘death of theory’ issue by stating that *archaeological* theory cannot die as the discipline has never possessed a theory not originally drawn from another discipline. Although their analysis is not extensive, they do raise the important point that anti-science post-modernist thought may be a contributing factor to the subjugation of evidence-based theoretical practice.

Neatly following this line of thought, Pluciennik, an academic archaeologist practising in the UK, examines the influence of culture and socio-political thought on major theoretical paradigms. Rather than espousing a particular position, Pluciennik’s paper emphasises how the pressure on archaeologists to achieve status in the academic ‘economy’ promotes the ‘new’ over the established and directly affects the development of archaeological theory. Although clearly not a fan of the ‘death of theory’ concept, and keen to point out its largely inapplicable and non-archaeological origin in French literary theory, Pluciennik’s view is that death might occur through the fragmentation of social and professional interactions amongst theorists and a lack of tolerance and multivocality.

German archaeologist Gramsch produces a stand-out contribution by responding to the question of the ‘death of theory’ in the context of Central European Archaeology (CEA). His paper includes a short discussion of CEA with extensive referencing, making it a good introduction for those examining CEA for the first time. His discussion of the ‘death of theory’ within a region which does not have any ‘theoretical archaeology’ leads to a description of

the essential poverty of archaeology practiced atheoretically, and a heart-felt plea for greater integration between theory and practice in CEA. Going further than Pluciennik and Flannery and Marcus, Gramsch put forwards his own theoretical model, a 'reflexive' archaeology that strongly reminds me of post-processual archaeology in its desire for self-critical awareness in archaeological practise.

The final paper by a contributing author is short at eight pages and incongruous in style and content. Kristiansen's work is dominated by unreferenced and unsupported statements, and in places his writing borders on the ideological. Kristiansen is, however, an established Danish academic, and I assume that his previous work (1996, 1998, 2001, 2002) contains the supporting evidence for his statements here. Stating at the beginning that theory can never die, only change, he goes on to discuss in extremely firm terms the failure of archaeology in the last 25 years, declaiming its decline in academic prestige, methodological rigour, scientific credibility and political support. The emphasis he places on the inclusion of what he refers to as 'natural science' in archaeology betrays his subjective position, and he is clearly a fervent believer in the benefits of "a more science based, rationalistic cycle of revived modernity" (78) in archaeology which focuses on answering the big "global problems" (78). His paper does not actually discuss archaeological theory, but rather lays out his belief in the failure of current archaeology and the potential for a major change in direction in the imminent future, which, by implication, means a significant change in archaeological theory. Whether critical examination can support his beliefs or not is impossible to judge on the basis of what is effectively a short manifesto, but certainly his words cannot fail to ignite the ire of post-processualists.

The question remains whether Kristiansen saw drafts of the other papers before allowing his own to be included, particularly as he makes no attempt to defend himself from

the accusations of ideopraxism levelled by Bintliff. This slightly disjointed feeling is symptomatic of the collection of papers, affecting both the way the editors' papers relate to the introduction, and how the contributing authors' papers relate to the editors' papers. Whilst the editors do attempt in the introduction to align each of the contributing authors' papers to their agenda of 'reflexivity and eclecticism', critical examination reveals that they do not read with the coherence the editors suggest. In addition the contributing authors' papers all demonstrate a lack of engagement with the meaning of the 'death of theory' concept as originally applied in literary studies, preferring to take the phrase at face value rather than respond to the original meaning by asking whether we as archaeologists would be better off without theory altogether.

The inclusion of papers from German, Danish and US archaeologists is to be commended, as they offer a valuable insight into how an archaeologist's views on an issue may vary depending on the context of their education and practice. Most of the papers are written in a refreshingly clear style, with the majority eschewing the aggressive and authoritarian edge that is sometimes found in archaeological theory debates. Published five years after the conference, this collection is a well-needed addition to the literature, not only in terms of the papers contained but also as one of the only publications tackling a pressing issue in theoretical archaeology today – the so-called 'death of theory' or 'second empiricism' (Witmore, 2010). With sessions on the 'death of theory' in multiple conferences (TAG 2009, TAG 2011) and meetings (Uppsala 2010) so far offering us no publications, commentators on the theory of current archaeological practice are failing to engage the practitioners whose work they study and seek to influence. This collection of papers offers a timely snapshot of current archaeological theory, and the very awkwardness and disjuncture commented on above may in retrospect prove characteristic of the

state of the field at this moment in time. However paradigms shift, or fail to shift, in the near future, it is hoped that this collection does not remain the only published discussion of the 'death of theory'.

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