

An interview with Dr. Ian Hodder, University of Cambridge

Question. *How did your years at the Institute influence your later career? If you were an undergraduate at the Institute now, do you think your career would have been similar?*

Ian Hodder. Well, I think that there are two ways in which the Institute influenced my career. The first one was that I had a fairly heavy training, at least I felt at the time, in Childean culture history and the movements of cultures and their relationships with each other across Europe. I'm sure that wasn't really the intention of the people that taught me all the time but there was, as well as trying to develop new approaches, a very strong emphasis on the grounding in an understanding of European culture history. So I learned a lot about types and distributions, and culture groups. I saw that training, and still do I suppose, as more or less a direct influence from Childe to students who were at the Institute at that time. I think that European culture history has always stayed with me as a dominant interest; ultimately I'm fascinated by that material and how it relates across Europe at different times, and why it changes. Even in *The Domestication of Europe*, although I'm doing something very different there, I still see it as basically trying to understand European prehistory in those sorts of broad sweeping culture-historical terms. So I think that was for me the most important thing at the Institute, that basic training in European prehistory which was very, very detailed and I don't think I could have got that anywhere else really.

The other thing was that the degree I did was actually called something like 'Prehistoric Archaeology and the Human Environment'. It was supposed to be an integrated course, and I think that it was. It was taught by people like [Geoffrey] Dimbleby and [Ian] Cornwall and they were on the third floor, the Human Environment Department floor, and we went up and down between the two floors. I really felt as if they were interested in integrating things; there was a real concern for how you could use soils and geology and seeds and bones to understand the way in which human societies developed and interrelated. It was all done at a very personal scale; there was a small enough group of us as students, and there was a small enough group of them that they did talk to each other. I may be completely idealising this, but I remember it as being very integrated and that I came out with really two sides of what I had been dealing with and that they were integrated in an interesting way. I came away with the impression that science can be a part of a humanistic discipline. Although it may not be apparent in much of what I have written, certainly I tried to integrate science in the way I approached field projects, either in the Fens where in the eighties I had a long project in the Haddenham area (that I hope will be published in the next year or so), or at Çatalhöyük; I think that in both those projects I've been very open to using scientific techniques within an integrated project and I think that was an important part of my undergraduate training.

In terms of whether my archaeological career would have been similar, I find it very difficult to answer that because I don't know very much about how the Institute does its teaching now, but I imagine in both of those ways it would have been different.

*Given that you were in the first group of undergraduate students to be admitted to the Institute and you still do remain emotionally attached to it (to quote from *The Domestication of Europe*), could you comment on the manner the Institute has changed since you left.*

Well, the obvious thing that one's noticed over the years going back to the Institute is that it just seems very packed and dense; there are so many people there. It just seems like it has changed from the much smaller scale thing that it was when I was there. I think we came into, as the first group of undergraduates, an Institute that was really designed for research, and so we fitted into that. The Institute hadn't become something that was dominated by large numbers of students, or even in which teaching was necessarily taken very seriously. We were fitted into a research context and I think that was very stimulating. I imagine now, because of the scale of things and the numbers of people involved, that that's not so possible.

As I say, I'm not entirely clear about what is happening there, and it's difficult for me to make statements. Clearly, however, there's an enormous pressure on resources in the Institute. My feeling is, that the way the Institute has developed it has tended to play to some of its strengths, which included its commitment to a professional scientific approach to archaeology, field methods, computing and the application of the natural sciences. While that of course has many benefits, there are other sides, perhaps not produced so much by the Institute itself, but by the broader framework of funding for sciences in the British Isles, which in my view have been extremely unfortunate. It's not anyone's fault, it's just the way science funding has developed in Britain because of the historical background and the way the research councils are organised. Nevertheless, the unfortunate consequence of that historical background has been that science funding has come in through a different arm to the funding for understanding past societies. As a result of that, the notion of 'archaeological science' has developed as an independent area and the money for that has tended to emphasise the development of techniques. Thus it's possible for people to do research in the technical development of techniques in archaeology. In the United States, for example, my impression is that that is relatively rare because the primary question that's always asked is what is the contribution of this research to the study of anthropology, what are the benefits, what is the payoff, what is it helping us to understand about the past? I think all too often in Britain, because of the different funding tracks, it has been possible to separate these two questions, the technical scientific questions and the study of past society. I think the Institute has fallen foul of that in the sense that it, like many other places in Britain, has tended to concentrate on the development of scientific techniques without them being adequately integrated into research questions which have validity in the historical or anthropological science that we work in.

When I wrote that I was emotionally attached to the Institute, it was a sort of sad emotion really. I feel sad that the Institute has really moved out of, or stayed outside many of, what I feel are the major debates in the discipline, because it has taken a rather technical road. The Institute in any case has an inward looking tendency, because it has sufficient size, I suppose, to be inward looking and because its central position in London allows it to be self-sufficient. That allied with this emphasis on a scientific, pragmatic and professional approach has meant that it has not wanted to get involved in the main currents of debate which have, therefore, taken place outside London. I am not talking

only about Cambridge of course and my own inward looking views. Many of the debates have taken place in Cambridge, but you could say the same of Glasgow or Lampeter. Many other places have seen more of a debate about what archaeology is, what it should be doing, and what its role is in society, than the Institute. My view of the Institute is that its contribution has been relatively limited and I think that's a great shame because it has meant that a potential for integration between the sciences and the discipline at large has been lost.

Also I think it's a great shame because I think that the Institute has the potential to hold a world position in terms of its size, facilities and resources. Although this may seem very critical, and I'm sure most people in the Institute would disagree with me, I think that the Institute doesn't really hold that world position. I travel a lot around the world and talk to people, and they talk to me about what's happening in Britain and they don't tend to be asking what's going on at the Institute, what are the great new ideas at the Institute. They're not aware of the Institute being at the centre of debate. Of course, I do have a very biased view because my main interest is in archaeological theory, and it could well be argued that the Institute plays a very major role in other areas. Still, my feeling is that it's a shame that the Institute hasn't been incorporated in a wider debate. So that, while it has contributed in some areas, it could also have contributed in other areas and been more of a leader in the field. I think that's why I said I feel attached to it emotionally, but it's a sort of nostalgia really, rather than a feeling of that's where I'd like to be. It may well be that things are changing now with the new intake of staff over the last few years - I think there have been some very imaginative appointments, and I hope that the direction will turn around and that the Institute will come to play more of a role in the wider debates in the discipline. I hope that very much, and it may well happen.

It's strange in a way that this has happened, given the fact that over the road at UCL Anthropology you have people who have played a role in the international debates and have been critical of how archaeology is being constructed and have contributed to theoretical discussion. I've never really understood why this hasn't had more of an impact on the Institute itself, especially with the joining of the Institute to UCL. While I think a lot of the fault must lie on the archaeological side, I have a suspicion that the fault also lies on the anthropological side because the type of anthropology that is being discussed there, although it notionally comes under the heading 'material culture studies', hasn't in fact really contributed to our understanding of material culture as such. The anthropologists there are quite understandably more interested in social issues, evolutionary issues, relationships between the past and present, and so on. Their particular set of interests hasn't been very specifically about material culture and how we deal with it and interpret it, and they have not really been specifically interested in archaeological problems and technologies of dealing with material culture. Their contribution to archaeological debate has been difficult to relate to material culture in a way that archaeologists perhaps easily understand. So I think there's fault on both sides. I know there are many other social and political factors involved, but it is again a shame that that centre of anthropological excellence hasn't had more of an impact on archaeology in London.

In the last issue of PIA we published a debate between Chris Tilley and David Harris concerning science and archaeology. What are your thoughts on this debate?

I looked at the debate, or the set of questions really, that you asked of Harris and Tilley and I found that I would probably take an in-between view in terms of their responses. I see that there is a necessary complementarity because of the nature of archaeological data. That complementarity involves the material side that is best approached through a materials science or natural science framework, and the cultural side which frames and gives meaning to the material. So in the very term 'material culture' you have the duality of archaeology, and for me that is one of the most interesting aspects of the discipline. As I said, as a student I found that very fascinating, that potential for integration. I think for all sorts of reasons it is now increasingly difficult to maintain the division. On the one hand we increasingly see the natural sciences as not themselves objective or even independent. People have shown very effectively how laboratory science - what goes on in the laboratory - is a highly social process. People's relationships, their networks, issues of power, what techniques they're using, what they see as a successful outcome and so on are all absolutely integrated into what they think is an interesting or valid question or answer. All the details of laboratory science we now recognise as a social process. The strict division between a sort of hard-line hypothesis-testing approach and a hermeneutic approach I think isn't valid in terms of what people do in practice. My own hermeneutic perspective would see scientific information as simply part of the sets of information that I am trying to make coherent in making sense of the past. When I'm sitting trying to understand a set of data, for me the scientific data is just one part of that; I'm trying to integrate it into a story and the more scientific data I have the better because the scientific data is often based on universal aspects of materials. So as much scientific information as possible ought to be present and integrated into a story or narrative about what's happening on the site. It's undoubtedly the case that if I want to understand pottery I need scientific analysis of the residues to make sense of pottery decoration and the pottery shape and so on. I don't understand at all the divide, and there's no need for any sort of divide at all. We are just providing more information from lots of different sources - whether it's historical sources, ethno-historic sources, archaeological excavation, scientific laboratory analysis - the more of those you have that you can integrate together the more of a well-networked coherent hermeneutic whole you can construct.

Having said that, it's very interesting that archaeology does involve different ways of doing things. The way that the faunal expert or the botanical expert or the residue expert works is different from the way the ceramic expert or the figurine expert works. It's important for us to try and understand those differences and not to suppose that all archaeological endeavours are using the same methodologies; I think we should accept that there are many different methodologies that are being used. To call some of them scientific and some of them un-scientific I don't think is in any way helpful.

Do you think that this placing of scientific data in a hermeneutic or a narrative framework has the effect of removing the objectivity and then therefore eliminating the scientific value?

First, I doubt if very many natural scientists would claim some sort of absolute

objectivity. Within science there are a lot of things like the uncertainty principle and so on, which means that many of the simplistic definitions of the way scientists work have to be accommodated and transformed. So on the one hand, I don't think we can, in any simple way, say that science is producing objective data, but clearly it's producing more rigorous and more objective data than some other areas of research do. Nevertheless, it is not getting you very far to say with your scientific techniques that the elm pollen declined at 3300 BC, or to say that in this shape of pots people were drinking beer or cooking porridge. If you simply left it at that, you would have a collection of completely unrelated facts, which would be equivalent to stamp collecting. In my view, the only justification for doing that research, for doing the analysis of pollen for example, is so that you can link it to some story or narrative about what went on in the past. Until you can say the elm declined because something else happened, or until you can say why people were eating porridge in this type of pot and link it to social and cultural and economic questions, that's when this research is justifiable, and only then. So, yes of course, be as objective as you possible can, but that objectivity is only valid if it then contributes to an interpretation of what happened in the past. I feel that strongly as a member of society, or as a tax-payer, as much as I do as an archaeologist. I think that it is appalling that funds are often wasted just on people basically stamp collecting in science, or conducting science for science's sake.

Archaeological science plays a significant role in the current excavation of Çatalhöyük. Do you see a conflict between this and the individualistic, relativist approach of both post-processualists and New Age groups for whom Çatalhöyük is such a potent symbol?

If we take the post-processual approach on the one hand and the New Age groups on the other, I've already said I think, from a post-processual point of view that I see a scientific approach as a necessary integrated part of what we are doing. Çatalhöyük to me is a fascinating site partly because it has a lot of different types of material and a lot of evidence and there is no way I can begin to think of really making sense of all that evidence without using an enormous battery of scientific techniques. In fact, I want to use as many possible scientific techniques as I can get my hands on. I want to try everything that's possible as it is such a unique site and there's so much that could be said about it and I don't want to lose any chance there is of using scientific techniques to understand it. But the aim of that is not the scientific techniques, the aim is to understand Çatalhöyük. I want to know as much as I can about the site so that when I make my hermeneutic whole, I have more bits to fit in and there's more bits of the jigsaw puzzle to fit together to make coherent. I need as much data as I can to make my accommodative argument seem persuasive. If I say I have ranking in this house on the basis of the ceramic evidence, I want that to be supported by a ranking on the basis of some other type of evidence. So the more duplication and the more rich networking information I can get by using scientific techniques the better.

What one recognises when looking at symbolism and meaning is that there is a notion of arbitrariness. What symbols mean is ultimately arbitrary, but a key into what they mean is gained through various types of universals. Let's take an extreme example: if you had a theory that some of the bull's horn platforms at Çatalhöyük were used for human sacrifice, that remains an almost impossible and arbitrary meaning that is difficult to justify or demonstrate. But if, using scientific techniques, you could demonstrate that

there is blood on and around that platform, or in fact only on that platform, and then, if you were using DNA analysis - well, highly unlikely but just say by some very peculiar preservation you could get some DNA out of it - then you might be able to say that this is human blood and you might find the tools with the blood on and so on. That is using universal information, our understanding of DNA and blood and so on, to understand one particular and arbitrary historical association. It's the universality of the scientific techniques or assumptions that give a key into understanding particular and arbitrary meanings and symbols in the past.

The New Age issue is really very interesting, and I was as surprised as anyone, I think, when we had people come to the site and treat it really as a shrine to pray at. I'm not sure how to deal with that. Clearly those people - the mother goddess cult people, earth mother people - aren't interested in scientific results. It became clear in our discussions with them that they knew what happened at the site because they could feel it religiously. They knew that women were important at Çatalhöyük because they could feel it coming at them through the earth. It didn't matter what scientific techniques said or what rational scientific conclusions we drew, they simply believe something else. There is a real disjunction there - a difficulty of communication. I think we do have to begin to think how to deal with people who come to the site not to see it as a site but as a religious shrine. I suppose one has to accept that that is another perspective on Çatalhöyük and that one has to provide facilities for those people to enjoy the site from that perspective. It means different types of access, different types of activities they want to conduct at the site, different things they want to see and hear. I think it is an example of the different audience whose needs have to be catered for as a special and separate set of needs.

One of the frequent criticisms of post-processual archaeology is that it has been largely an armchair movement centred on critique and does not have any relevance to archaeological fieldwork. Do you think that this is a fair criticism?

Well, I think the criticism of post-processual archaeology as not demonstrating applications is unfair because there are now a lot of book-length applications of post-processual archaeology. I'm not really sure what post-processual archaeology is any more but if you call people like Julian Thomas and John Barrett post-processual, their books are extended examples of people applying theories. I think it is the case that post-processual ideas are informing a wide variety of applications and interpretations of archaeological data. Your question is specifically, I think, about fieldwork. I think it is the case that post-processual archaeology hasn't really contributed much to an understanding of field techniques. Just in general terms I think it's probably true to say that processual archaeology is more method driven and its main contribution was in methods, whereas post-processual archaeology really picked up on the fact that processual archaeology was very feeble theoretically and that it was not drawing in the wider theoretical debates in other disciplines. Archaeology was being left behind theoretically, and that is, in my view, the main thing that post-processual archaeology did; it linked archaeological debate to the wider debates in the social sciences. In doing that, its main emphasis was theoretical rather than in terms of methodology, so we have certainly felt at Çatalhöyük that we want to try and develop techniques which demonstrate how post-processual archaeological ideas fit into the fieldwork context.

I could talk at great length about the way I see what I would call a contextual methodology developing. I think that what it all boils down to is that within objective, processual science, it was accepted that the categories we bring to the data are arbitrary or they're in the present, but it was nevertheless felt that somehow, as long as we codified them and used them repeatedly, they would be an adequate basis for studying sites. A great emphasis was placed on further codification of type-series, codification of context, and pits and units and layers and strata and sampling procedures and so on. The problem with that is that it denies the reality that categories and entities are defined contextually. We know at a theoretical level that that is true. It can't be right simply to impose our understanding of categories onto the past, so what we need to develop is a methodology which gets around this problem of starting with a set of pre-formed categories which are then applied to the data, as then the results that come out are obviously dependent on your pre-formed categories. We somehow have to get out of that bind, but on the other hand we have to start somewhere. What we're trying to do at Çatalhöyük is develop a methodology which allows categories and entities to be fluid, and for their definition to be informed by context so that how you describe an artefact, or how you describe a pit, or how you describe an association, or how you describe anything, is related to other evidence from the site. Everything is related to everything else; that's the ultimate contextual idea. The whole is more than the sum of the parts. The meaning of the 'thing' is not decontextualised, not to be taken out into some universal code, but the meaning of the thing is dependent or relative to everything else in the context. In our situation the context is the site or the region and what we're trying to do is develop methodologies which allow that idea to be developed. We're trying to develop coding techniques, coding forms, and analytical techniques which have only one fixed point - a three-dimensional co-ordinate of every artefact or layer or dimension. Everything else can then swirl around that and we can keep changing our interpretations. We are trying to have multiple interpretations that are maintained at the same time and have different concurrent definitions of artefacts. Someone can come along with another idea about what might be going on and that alternative interpretation can be fed in and used as part of the interpretation procedure. For instance, we can try a different boundary between large and small bone points and see what result we get in terms of the spatial pattern. We can play around endlessly with the data looking for new patterns depending on how we understand the variables. I think that modern technologies allow us to do that. I think that the initial database management systems that people were using in the seventies and eighties forced one into a relatively rigid codification of things, and codification became necessary in order to allow the handling of large amounts of data. Nowadays, I think with much more powerful and relational, interactive, multimedia data-systems it's possible to have much more fluid processes of dealing with the data. They are much more exploratory and heuristic and interpretative.

Will this contextual methodology affect the presentation of archaeology to the public? Are you concerned with an ivory-tower syndrome arising in theoretical archaeology?

I think that many of the changes in heritage and museums that we have been seeing recently are parallel to the post-processual developments in archaeology. All the heritage emphasis on multiple interpretation and interactive displays, gender issues, use of virtual reality, are clearly paralleled by the emphasis on multiple meanings, dialectical interactions

between the past and the present, gender and so on in archaeology. I think that there has been - although I'm not claiming that in any way one is dependent on the other - a general shift in these sorts of directions in both museums and archaeology. While I don't think that a contextual approach necessarily affects the presentation of archaeology, I think that both are very much informed by the same sets of ideas and goals.

The second part of the question strikes me partly as a very Institute type question because it is as if there is a worry that theoretical archaeology is too ivory-towered and that somehow contrasts with the strength of the Institute - that it has got its feet on the ground. As I said before, I think that is an unfortunate division. I think that it is important to recognise that theory is practice and practice is theory and that an adequate and practical understanding should be highly theoretically informed. One should be aware of the assumptions one is bringing to the data, to the techniques, to the methods one is using and aware of how one's conclusions are very much channelled and determined by the techniques that one uses. I think that it is important that people who are more with their feet on the ground should get themselves involved in theoretical debates. On the other hand, I think there is a place for pure theory in the sense that what pure theoretical discussion does is to open up opportunities and potentials and ideas which then people have to try and grapple with and make use of. It is important that pure theoretical discussion is there, in my view, so that it opens up the sphere of possible ideas that are around. But I don't really believe in pure theory; I think that even the purest theoretical discussion is in fact a type of practice that has to be understood in the specific context within which that knowledge is being generated. Certainly the context in which theory is produced in Cambridge, or which archaeology produces in Cambridge, is different from the one in London - the conditions are different. But that doesn't stop, I don't think, more of an integrated debate about the role of theory in practice. I'm not concerned with the ivory-tower syndrome of theoretical archaeology - I think it is important that theoretical archaeology exists as a set of independent questions.

Given your involvement in Turkish archaeology can you comment on the conflict between Turkey's geographical and cultural position - as part of Asia and the Islamic world - and its political and economic aspirations towards Europe. How does this affect your research at Çatalhöyük in both a practical and theoretical sense?

There are many aspects of this that we could talk about. Turkey, particularly at the moment, is embroiled in a whole series of conflicts and oppositions and there are many difficult political, social and economic issues that anyone working there is involved in. There is the issue of whether Turkey is or should be, or wants to be, part of Europe, and the relationship between Asia and Europe. There are the issues of religious fundamentalism which are particularly strong in the Konya area where Çatalhöyük is situated. There are also human rights issues that Turkey is involved in. In all of these aspects one has to think what one is doing there and what is the impact of what we're doing in the project on these wider issues.

To illustrate with a simple example, I'm looking for sponsorship to build a dig-house and set of laboratories at Çatalhöyük and there is the opening of an offer of fairly substantial support from a local company called Efes Pilsen, which is a beer production company. But in discussing that potential offer, it became clear that this was an offer that might not be acceptable to the fundamentalist groups in the Konya region. Nevertheless,

the project needs sponsorship and I strongly sympathise with those Turks, including most of those who work on the project, who argue that the fundamentalist movements in Turkey are, at least in some respects, dangerous.

Generally at the moment I'm taking the view that we should participate in Turkey and play a role in these debates. For example, I think just the process of digging Çatalhöyük is extremely important in contemporary Turkey because it is clearly not an Islamic site. No one can argue that it is in any remote way Islamic, so that it supports the idea that Turkey is a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. My view at the moment is that any such statement is a constructive one. I can see that at a later point or in another situation, it could come to be the case that I felt that our being there was in some sense negative, or I felt that we were supporting things that I didn't want to support, and I would want to withdraw. However, I think it important to be there to participate and contribute to a debate, rather than to withdraw and wash one's hands of it.

There's always going to be a balance about what the right thing to do is. On the whole, I take the benign view that we're all part of a world system and that we're all parts of the same sets of issues and that it's wrong to turn one's back. I was involved in the boycott, for example, of South Africa and I can imagine that in a different situation it might be appropriate to take a different position on our involvement in Turkey. What I'm specifically referring to is that if the human rights issue worsened, I could conceive of taking a different position. I do feel it's difficult to be working in and with a country where clear human rights abuse is taking place, and I think that's something we have to be monitoring and trying to take a position on. I think it is important to realise that whatever one is doing at a very visible site like Çatalhöyük does have an impact. At the moment, there are so many other things that one can do that are positive and constructive that I think that as long as one is aware of what is happening and tries to channel it as best one can, we should stay there and take part and play a role.

Do you feel that by excavating Çatalhöyük you are bring Turkey closer to the EEC - bringing it into Europe in any sense?

I suppose one has to accept that people will understand what we do from their own perspective, and to a certain extent one can't control that. My own perspective is that I feel very strongly that the idea that one can see a clear break today between Europe and Asia which is historically supported should be undermined. It should be seen that, in fact, in large parts of prehistory Anatolia is very, very closely related to what we now see as Southeast Europe. Therefore, I want to do all that I can to break down the notion that in some sense Europe is superior to or dominant over Asia. Of course, we are only doing that in a very small and insignificant way, but I think that the more work that is done that shows there wasn't a boundary in prehistory the better.

I'm still very aware that even today amongst teachers and students there are notions of something being unique about European prehistory - that somehow there is something unique and distinctly European about, for example, the lack of development of the state in the Bronze Age or the emphasis on metalwork and exchange and production and individualism, rather than great autocratic despotic states, as seen, or claimed, in Asia. I find that view extremely presentist and a totally inadequate understanding of what is a relevant scale in prehistory. The idea that Europe in any sense existed in prehistory seems to me extraordinary. I am assuming that most people's lives

were lived within a very narrow focus and very few people, if anyone, would have had any real notion that they were living in the Linienbandkeramik culture or in the Corded Ware culture - never mind having a sense of what Europe looked like at all. I think that the sort of map understanding that we have, the map-eye view, is something we tend to impose on the past. Most of the large scale things that we see as archaeologists are unintended by-products, unintended consequences, of smaller scale processes. I don't believe that anyone planned the Corded Ware culture, or anyone planned the La Tène culture. They are the unintended by-products of a whole lot of very complex local processes that we have to understand at that scale. Therefore, to talk about Europe or some unique characteristic of Europe seems to me to be very inappropriate.

Ian Hodder was talking to James Conolly and Enrico Giannitrapani