

STICHTING Archaeological DIALOGUES

Monday 18 APRIL 2016

09:30	Registration desk open	
10:00	Word of welcome	
10:10	Keynote address: W. Jongman <i>University of Groningen</i>	There is no archaeological theory, only archaeological method.
Session 1: Economy		
11:00	T. Meier <i>University of Heidelberg</i>	Another world is possible?
11:30	P. Verhagen & J. Joyce <i>Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam</i>	Experimenting with theory: how modelling can cover the middle range. A case study in modelling surplus production in the Dutch Roman <i>limes</i> .
12:00	Lunch	
Session 2: Religion		
13:30	A. Nieuwhof <i>University of Groningen</i>	A new perspective on the study of religious phenomena in archaeology.
14:00	J.L. Ainsworth <i>University of Leicester</i>	The problems of heroes in the middle ground; why Herakles works better in practice.
14:30	K. de Roest <i>University of Groningen</i>	Praise cultural change. A plead for integrating cognitive religious studies in our search for answers.
15:00	Tea/coffee break	
Session 3: Identity		
15:30	K. de Vries <i>University of Groningen,</i>	Making methods theoretical: the problem of typologies.
16:00	A. Gardner <i>UCL Institute of Archaeology</i>	Practice theory and the middle range: linking patterns to identities.
16:30	D.P. van Helden <i>University of Leicester</i>	Telling Babies from Bathwater. Analysing archaeological applicability of 'identity'.
17:00	T. Meier <i>University of Heidelberg</i>	Discussion
17:30	Closing remarks	
17:45	Drinks reception	

Theories of the middle ground: *New perspectives on an old problem*

Marxism, Structuration, Darwinism. When explicitly discussing theory in archaeology we almost invariably discuss big overarching theories. Without exception these are borrowed from other disciplines. While it is perfectly acceptable, indeed advisable, to discuss the merits of what others are doing, it is odd that the truly archaeological theories are rarely discussed. We seldom seem to get to the point in the discussion of what a theory developed within, say, sociology would look like for archaeology.

Perhaps it is because Binford spoiled the term 'Middle range theory' that archaeologists have shied away from the middle ground between grand theory and method. Perhaps we all realise it is very difficult to come up with our own theories and are feverishly discussing an ever expanding range of grand theories so that we do not have to face the fact that we do not quite know how to translate our theoretical finesses into practice.

By failing to do so we are not only hampering communication between 'theorists' and 'non-theorists' by providing the latter with reasons for claiming that theory is too esoteric and never touches the 'real' archaeology, we are also selling archaeological theory short. By only discussing others' theories and neglecting the archaeological dimension we fail to contribute to the wider discussion from our unique archaeological standpoint and end up doing sociology (or other disciplines), but poorly.

At the upcoming Archaeology and Theory symposium Stichting Archaeological Dialogues hopes to initiate a frank and honest debate about the need for, but also the difficulties of, these "theories of the middle ground". How should grand theories be studied or implemented archaeologically? We invite papers to reflect on these issues in the following three sessions:

Religion

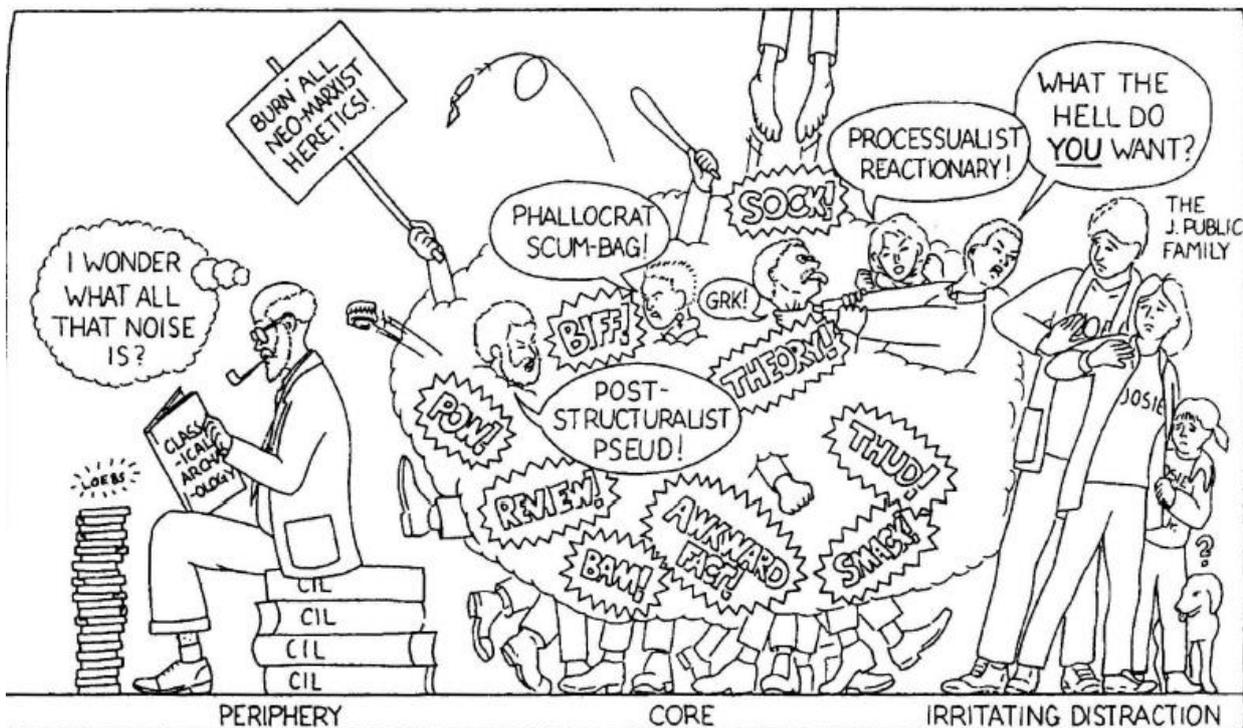
Religion is an almost traditional theory topic. High on Hawkes' ladder of inference (1954, 162), difficult to get at 'common-sensically', it is perfect for archaeological theory. However, as highlighted in the general section above, there is little archaeology in the discussion. How do we avoid becoming a handmaiden to religious studies? For this session we invite contributions that reflect on bridging the gap between archaeological data and bigger theories.

Identity

There is not a single theoretical term that has been so widely discussed (or at least thrown about) in the recent archaeological literature as 'identity'. When reading the literature cited in the discussion, one cannot escape the emphasis that is placed on the fluidity, multiplicity and situational nature of people's identit(y/ies). However, we see little engagement with these potentially major problems for the archaeological study of past identities. Instead, we often see that once some of the theoretical debate has been touched upon, little is changed archaeologically. This session's aim is to discuss, or to reflect on, ways to get beyond the point of providing poor illustrations of others' theories.

Economy

Economy is a topic that many of us approach not quite as warily as we would, for example, religion. We seem to assume that economic processes are more straightforward to trace archaeologically. Yet, with theories that are developed in modern market economies and strong disagreement between proponents of different schools in studying the current economy, perhaps we should be more careful. For this session we invite contributions that show how specific economic theories can be applied to archaeological research.



Archaeological Theory in 1988, by Simon James (in Johnson 1999)

ABSTRACTS

Keynote Address

There is no archaeological theory, only archaeological method.

W. Jongman, University of Groningen

The idea that there can be such a thing as archaeological theory has been one of the discipline's biggest conceptual mistakes, even if it provided an attractive arena for tribal warfare. Compared to 'historical' societies, there is nothing inherently specific to the societies studied by archaeologists. In fact, the same is true for historical societies compared to contemporary societies. Therefore, an economic historian will use the same economic theory as a student of the contemporary world, and so should an economic archaeologist. That does not mean that the past and the present are the same, but it does mean that the social theories to explain them are the same (theory is indeed important). Also, this does not imply that the old dilemma of the researcher's own cultural, political and other biases is suddenly overcome; only that such biases are not a specifically archaeological problem. So just as there is no historical theory, there is no archaeological theory either.

This does not mean that there is nothing specific to what the archaeologist does, but it is my contention that the specificity is in the types of data and the methods used, not in the social theory. Archaeology is historiography based on a particular kind of data. Methodologically, that is not an easy thing, far from it, but neither is historiography from documentary data. It demands careful sampling strategies, careful data recording, and most of all, hard thinking about the operationalization from social processes to archaeological data: are our proxies the right ones?

Archaeologists are wrong to live on their own island, and in the mistaken belief in their own religion of a distinct archaeological theory. Historians are wrong to remain so lazily ignorant of what archaeology can tell them about life in the past.

Session 1: Economy

Chaired by: Daniël van Helden (University of Leicester)

Another world is possible?

T. Meier, University of Heidelberg

Most archaeological interpretations in the realm of „economy“ imply some kind of capitalistic rationality in the economic behaviour of ancient societies and individuals. This is frequently even applied to the locational choices of wild plants or the food selections of animals. Usually we have internalised the basic capitalist principles of our society so deeply that we take them for "natural" and timeless universals. From economic history it is clear that the idea of capitalism is a rather modern one not much older than two and a half centuries and ethnologists of the last half century have observed, described and researched a lot of non-capitalist, „but“ successful economic systems. Yet, even in the shadow of the actual economic crisis the capitalist paradigm is hardly questioned in archaeology; thus archaeology helps to save and re-enforce the power relations of a late capitalistic world system.

Taking into account the political responsibility of our discipline I feel the obligation to present more than a seemingly unquestionable eternal story of growing capitalistic success, but to test other economic theories against reality as well. Do they provide equally or even more convincing frames of understanding and interpretation of our archaeological observations? Is it possible to think other economic worlds in the past? And what was their economic and social outcome in terms of sufficiency, sustainability and public welfare? My case study refers to the Carolingian economy east of the Rhine: For more than a century the economy of the 8th-10th century AD was regarded to be hopelessly back, producing hardly more than famine, poverty and high death rates (disregarding the cultural and political success of Charlemagne's empire). Such malfunctioning was mostly attributed to the lack of free entrepreneurship or – more rarely – to the feudal disorganization and overexploitation of a slave economy. Only recently historians and archaeologists have started to apply fundamentally different economic theories to material and written sources. In this case study I try to show that alternative theories of „embedded economy“ (Polanyi), „gift-exchange“ (Mauss) and „subsistence economy“ (Sahlins) can be combined to a new narrative of the Eastern-Carolingian economy, social system and mentality. These alternative, non-capitalistic theories are tested against archaeological data (and written sources) and tied together in a rather optimistic perspective on a healthy and prosperous Carolingian society. Thus, the validity and applicability of alternative economic theories are tested and the alleged human constant of capitalist rationality is scrutinised to open new paths of thinking and discussion in the actual late-capitalistic crisis.

Experimenting with theory: how modelling can cover the middle range. A case study in modelling surplus production in the Dutch Roman *limes*.

P. Verhagen & J. Joyce, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

In the call for papers for AD2016, the organizers mention that Binford ‘spoiled’ middle range theory (MRT) – but perhaps archaeologists have not always understood the nature of MRT. We suggest that the main problem with Binford’s definition of MRT is found in its emphasis on replicability: MRT was explicitly confined to processes that can be observed and/or replicated in the present. Where it concerns socio-economic processes, we are then confronted with a real problem, since there is no laboratory in which to replicate past societies – or is there? The current rise of computer modelling approaches to socio-economic questions – and in particular agent-based modelling - seems to suggest otherwise. These modelling techniques are now used to simulate the dynamics of social, economic and natural processes, not just in isolation, but in conjunction, and at different levels of interaction. And they make us think not just about the resulting patterns, but even more about how to build theories.

In this paper we will discuss these issues using the example of surplus production in the Dutch Roman *limes*. Recent research - contradicting earlier studies - has suggested that the Dutch River Area possessed sufficient resources to produce a food surplus that could be traded with the Roman occupiers. However, we still don’t know how the change of the supposedly self-sufficient pre-Roman economy to a more market-based economy came about. Was a drastic redistribution of labour necessary, did agricultural practices change, were changes in settlement pattern and territorial division required for a more efficient allocation and redistribution of resources, and why do we seem to witness population growth despite the increased pressure on resources by the Roman administration? In trying to come to terms with these questions, we had to use and develop middle-range theoretical concepts that would allow us to set up plausible models and scenarios of surplus production, and compare these with the archaeological record. In this way, we have tried to build theory bottom-up, instead of relying on (too) grand theories to explain the archaeological record.

Session 2: Religion

Chaired by: Martine van Haperen (Leiden University)

A new perspective on the study of religious phenomena in archaeology

A. Nieuwhof, University of Groningen

Religion comes from the human mind as a by-product of evolutionary advantageous capacities. That grand, cognitive theory, which is at the basis of my research, in itself is difficult to apply in archaeology. However, it serves as a background against which to judge the usefulness of other, less encompassing ideas and theories.

My PhD-research was concerned with the identification and interpretation of ritual in the archaeological record, in particular in an area with excellent preservation conditions: the terp region of the northern Netherlands. Unlike 'religion', or rather: religious ideas, ritual is a human activity, which may leave traces in the archaeological record. Ritual does not need to be religious, but religious ideas are usually accompanied by rituals. That implies that studying the remains of rituals may lead to a better understanding of religious and other ideas in the past.

An interesting 'middle ground' theory, which is based in the cognitive approach of religion and ritual, was forwarded by Lawson and McCauley (1990; also McCauley and Lawson 2002). This theory is concerned with the way in which the supernatural may be related to religious rituals. They distinguish three different ways: as special agents, as special patients and as special instruments. These different ways provide a better understanding of what religious rituals are, and of how they may be identified and interpreted.

This theory can only be fruitfully applied in archaeology when the identification of the remains of rituals is not hindered by a negative approach ('we don't know what else it can be so it must be ritual') or by a reluctance of identifying ritual as a meaningful category, for whatever reason.

This presentation will shortly discuss a toolkit of positive criteria and approaches that can be helpful in identifying the remains of rituals, religious as well as non-religious. Application of this toolkit leads to the identification of many more ritual deposits than is customary in archaeology. The theory of Lawson and McCauley will then be used to discuss the differences between religious and non-religious rituals. Examples from the terp region will substantiate these allegations.

The problems of heroes in the middle ground; why Herakles works better in practice.

J.L. Ainsworth, University of Leicester

The figure of Herakles or Hercules is found on objects from across the ancient world, and he can be seen as an 'everyman' symbol of not only Greek culture, but the study of Greek art. His centrality to religion and identity in the ancient Mediterranean has prompted scholars to regard him as the 'middle ground' when cultures interact (Malkin, 2011; Spatafora, 2013) through study of his place in literary texts. I argue that a purely textual approach is a missed opportunity to bridge the gap between theory and practice by focusing on the choices of individuals. Herakles' persona as a mortal who achieved divinity through his own efforts allows us to make sense of the aspirations and attitudes to power of the individuals who chose to use his image. Although these

images continued to be seen and used well into the Roman period, they are still considered to derive from classical Greek prototypes, and thus to represent the natural supremacy of a classical Greek art slavishly copied by Romans. As a result, models of Hellenisation, Romanisation and cultural emulation seize upon the familiar aspects of such representations to demonstrate the dominance of colonial powers in the provinces of the Roman Empire. I argue that by considering only what is familiar about an image, we ignore the evidence for discrepant experience of provincial life provided by such an aspirational figure of power.

Through the use of detailed case studies from Rome's first overseas province, Sicily, I consider the evidence provided by the context and biography of objects bearing the figure of Herakles for the artistic choices available to and made by creators, traders, commissioners and buyers. By investigating objects made or used during the period of a province's integration within the Empire, I draw conclusions about the different identities sought, adapted or rejected by communities as Rome's power became established. By considering the different cultural inspirations and contexts for provincial art, traditionally dismissed as non-classical, emulative, or simply 'bad art', we can attempt to identify and explain in practice the significance and impact of the local choices of individuals in the ancient world.

Praise cultural change. A plead for integrating cognitive religious studies in our search for answers

K. de Roest , University of Groningen

Culture is recognized through change: only through contrast in material culture can we establish (cultural) boundaries. Religious ideas are, on the one hand amongst the most important fuels for cultural change, and, on the other, they are amongst the most conservative forces. Therefore they are worth studying, for example in explaining mortuary rites and thoughts of the afterlife. In theory, we acknowledge this value of religious studies. In reality, we skew away from elusive concepts we can never exactly pinpoint, with the idea that speculations undermine the scientific nature of our profession.

This paradox has had serious implications: in the instances where religion or cosmology is approached, the concepts used within archaeology are already dismissed in the field of (cognitive) religious studies. Since not enough effort is made in reaching out to verify the applicability of theories, the field of religious studies has no incentive to correct this. In fact, it goes the other way around as well: new directions within the study of religion use (pre)historical examples in their studies, that we might question.

Here, I will demonstrate that, although the study of cognitive religion is a broad field of study with many directions, it has interesting ideas to offer archaeology. This goes beyond the point of mere illustration. Theories like the dual-process model, or the theory on the role of counterintuitive agents, could provide insights in answering our questions. I plead for a multi-angled approach when religion in the past is concerned. In doing so, archaeologists may very well be the ones reaching out to invite the other party and explore new directions in a search for explanations of cultural change.

Session 3: Identity

Chaired by: Canan Cakirlar (University of Groningen)

Making methods theoretical: the problem of typologies

K. de Vries, University of Groningen, Groningen Institute of Archaeology

Research into identity is about understanding the essentials of being human: how people form communities and still act as individuals within them. In this sense, societies are never truly monocultural. Sociological and anthropological research has stressed the fluid and relational character of ethnicity and identity. Only with a thorough understanding of the context within which identity is expressed, this important topic can be understood. Moreover, archaeology has something to add to the discussion, as it has the potential to describe (changes in) identity expression with a time depth that exceeds sociology or anthropology.

It is exactly because we as archaeologists deal with such long timeframes that too often the focus is on long-term *diachronic* variations in material culture (change through time) which resulted in typo-chronologies. *Synchronic* variations – essential for our understanding of identity expression – are often left undiscussed. This is a shame, because synchronic variations in material culture enable us to understand how people chose on the one hand to express their ties with larger social groups and on the other hand emphasise their local or individual identity. This is not a flaw in applying theory in archaeology, rather a problem of methodology. In our ambition to theorise archaeology, we forget to theorise our archaeological methodology. Only if we are conscious of the fact that methodology also has a theoretical basis, we can incorporate topics as identity into the archaeological discipline.

Practice theory and the middle range: linking patterns to identities

A. Gardner, UCL Institute of Archaeology

If we define archaeology in a holistic sense as the most encompassing study of humanity across time and space, then all kinds of theories from other fields are relevant to that endeavour. However, some kinds of theory are inevitably more tractable with conventional archaeological data than others, and this depends not so much on the kinds of questions they address as how their basic conceptual building blocks mesh with archaeological patterns, particularly at the level of the individual site and the contexts within it. In this paper, I will argue that one of the most appropriate frameworks to link archaeological patterning with broad interpretation of social and cultural dynamics is the suite of approaches defined by the label 'practice theory'. In reality a range of cognate perspectives, practice theories help us to define both social life and archaeological patterns in terms of routine, or sometimes novel, sets of activities. Furthermore, they enable us, through comparative analysis at regional scales, to assess how these activities were significant in the construction of different identities. Although the relevance of practice theories has been recognised since the 1980s, the theoretical bandwagon has in some senses moved on without their full potential being realised. In this paper I will hope to demonstrate, through case-studies from Roman provincial archaeology, that if we aim to improve the practice of our theories, we should take another look at theories of practice.

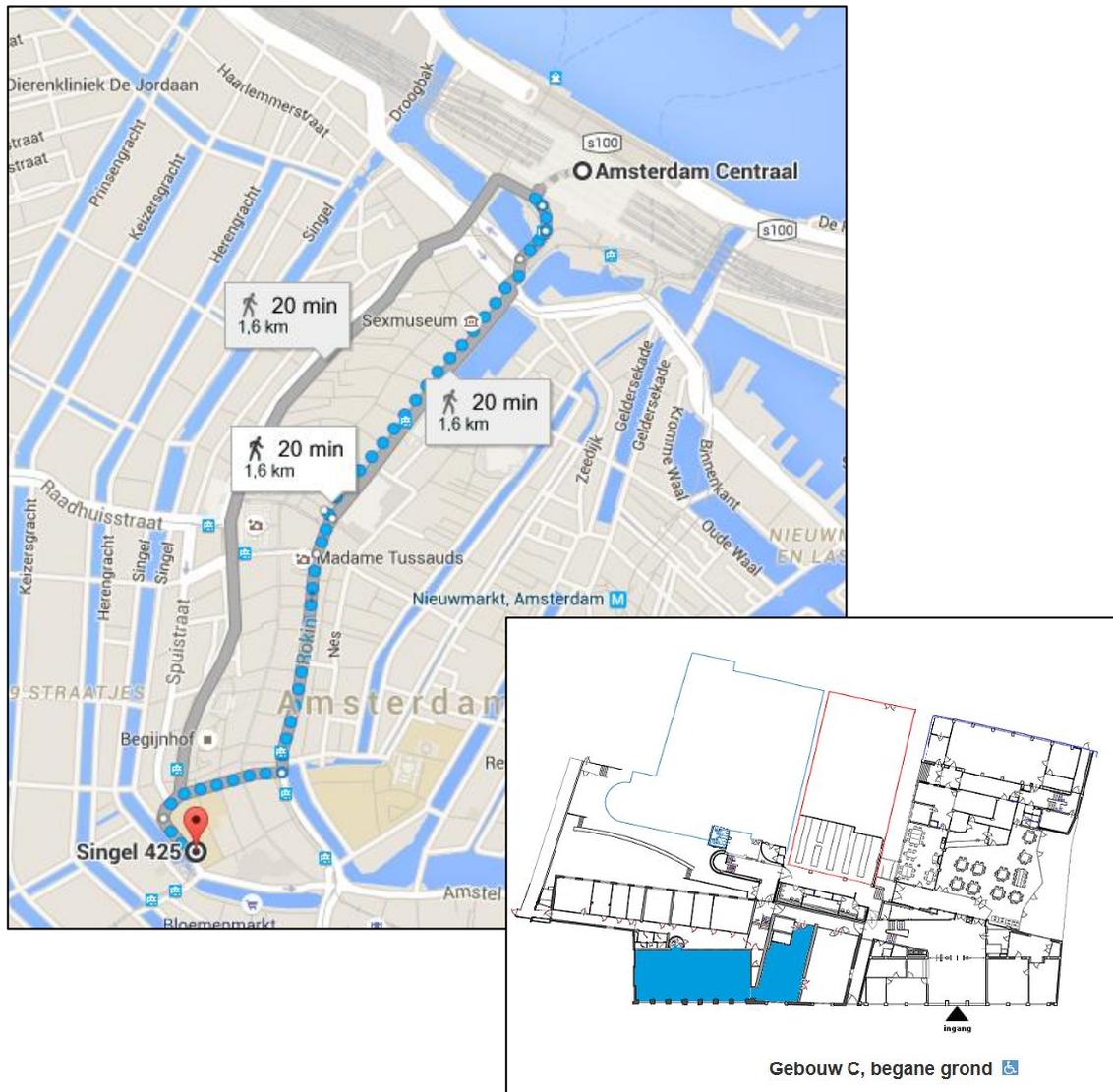
Telling Babies from Bathwater. Analysing archaeological applicability of 'identity'

D.P. van Helden, University of Leicester

There are theories in other disciplines that most of us would agree are not viable candidates for adoption into archaeology. Outside the context of the pub, I doubt anyone would argue for the archaeological merits of string theory. Yet beyond such extreme examples lies a grayscale of theories which could potentially be used in archaeology. How do we differentiate between successful ones and those that do not work? The answer lies in the middle ground that is the theme of today's symposium.

Using my own research into the limits of the archaeological applicability of the concept of identity as a case, which illustrates the problem posed by the symposium's theme, I will take a look at the *process* of evaluating success of a given theory. By looking at what has been done and what could still be done with the concept of identity to bridge the gap between big theory and detailed data I have tried to gauge how appropriate 'identity' is as an archaeological tool. An explicit awareness of the process by which we can evaluate theories' merits for archaeology not only increases our efficiency with the limited resource of research effort, but also the potential of actually linking theory and data.

Location



University Library Singel

Doelenzaal

Singel 425, 1012 WP Amsterdam

Telephone: 020 525 2301

Directions

There is virtually no parking space in the vicinity of the library. It is, however, easy to reach by public transport from Amsterdam Central Station: trams 2, 4, 5, 9, 16, 20, 24 and 25, stop: either Spui or Muntplein. The Doelenzaal can be found on the ground floor, indicated above in blue.