

Matters of Scale: Processes and Courses of Events in the Past and the Present

Edited by Nanouschka M. Burström and Fredrik Fahlander

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The central aim of this edited collection of papers, created by the Postdoctoral Archaeology Group at the University of Stockholm, is to bring together contemporary perspectives, theories, and methodologies regarding archaeological processes. In the words of the editors, the volume seeks “to put the concept of process back on the map by evaluating and relating ‘processual’, ‘post-processual’, and ‘post-post-processual’ approaches” (page 2). The papers are thus contextualized as responses to the theoretical divergence between ‘New Archaeology’ (or Processualism) and reacting Post-Processualism. The processual camp had long been associated with the privileging of the macro-scale, social implications of data—even wishing for archaeology’s “convergence with cultural anthropology and the possibility of an eventual synthesis in a common search for sociocultural causality and law” (Willey and Phillips 1958: 2). Post-processualists, however, rejected both the determinist implications of systems theory and processualists’ investment in reaching broad social conclusions. These ‘interpretive’ archaeologists instead highlighted the importance of the individual and the particular (Weiberg, this volume: page 148). In an early critique of processual approaches, prominent post-processual archaeologist Ian Hodder stated that “we are not simply pawns in a game, determined by a system—rather, we use a myriad of means, including material culture symbolism, to create new roles, to redefine existing ones, and to deny the existence of others” (Hodder and Hutson 1986: 4). The editors of *Matters of Scale* add to the debate by contending that some processual approaches to archaeology—made infamous by post-processualist dismantling of their core premises—have been dismissed out of hand by younger generations of academics and professionals who are wary of rereading worn battle lines. Contributors to this volume explore the idea that by augmenting theories that extrapolate from small-scale data to reach wider conclusions (e.g. complex systems theory), archaeologists may gain a greater knowledge of past phenomena and archaeological process.

As post-processualists feared, the ‘colossal, polyhyphenated, multi-systemic monsters’ still exist (Ingold 1986), but *Matters of Scale* proposes that instead of dismissing these approaches out of hand we should rather concentrate on taming the processualist hydra in an attempt to better understand the past. By focusing on a central topic that has so marked the history of the discipline and has often shifted forms within archaeological literature, *Matters of Scale* is undeniably ambitious in scope. A positive, unifying thread in the volume’s contributions is the denial of reductionist thinking or simple categorization, with authors opting instead for explorations of contemporary theories with many complex and hybrid strands. However, the wide range of research relating to processes in subfields as diverse as heritage, Aegean archaeology, museum practice and European rock art stretches and tangles notions of process into a mental knot. The volume opens an expansive discourse on process in archaeology, but simultaneously leaves the reader with more epistemological questions than answers—especially regarding how and what archaeologists can learn from data and where these insights may be appropriately applied to reach broader social or ecological conclusions. The volume’s structure does not divide papers into specific groupings of processes, nor do the editors elucidate whether the processes so featured should be examined as taking place in the contemporary construction of knowledge about the past, or rather as discreet occurrences in historical societies. The volume tackles so many different processes in its contents (ironically confusing the contexts and scales of the discussed processes), that it is difficult to arrive at meaningful conclusions about the ambiguous concept of ‘process’ at the core of the work. Nevertheless, the volume’s contributions are in and of themselves interesting and valuable, so I here group the papers according to the general types of processes they address, in order to better elucidate and relate the information represented in the work.

The volume’s first two articles deal with the contemporary processes by which meaning is constructed around heritage and museum objects. Arnshav examines the multiple agencies at work in the legal process of defining and protecting shipwrecks in Sweden, as well as how the interaction between divers, heritage professionals, society and the material remains themselves can be viewed as a microcosm of overall social heritage construction. While she accepts that “ancient remains and traditions form part of a setting that humans in one way or another have to submit to” (page 11), she also acknowledges the complex processes set in motion by non-human agents. She describes the reinvigoration of the debate as a shipwreck’s bell, which bears the name of the vessel and acts as a surface synecdoche of the remains, the bell’s agency understood through the lens of Latour’s

actor-network theory (page 23). Sjögren, in contrast, focuses on the way that museum spaces and curatorial practices act on objects to transform their meanings in a modern context, obscuring their original sacred functions. She shows evidence of George W. Stocking's 'aestheticization' of objects in the archaeological museum at Olympia, Greece, where artefacts that originally served as sacred offerings are turned "primarily into objects of art, where it is their artistic qualities that should mainly be admired" (page 45) by the modern museum visitor.

Contributions by Monikander, Fri and Lindhagen deal in different ways with the difficulties presented by using the analysis of trends in the past to construct notions of cultural change through time. Monikander examines the shifting implications and interpretations of Early Iron Age strike-a-light belts, found in grave sites around Fennoscandia, an area now in Scandinavia, Finland and the Kola Peninsula. Researchers have previously linked their intricate designs and production techniques to Roman influence during the Iron Age; as Monikander notes, "diffusion has always been seen as a process going in a south-to-north direction, from the civilized Roman Empire to barbaric Scandinavia" (page 104). While the construction of this material points to connections with other European cultures, she points out that these entrenched frameworks bias interpretations of typologies and diffusion. The belts can easily be seen as evidence of well-connected elite in possession of a unique and sophisticated material culture. Fri presents Bronze Age finds from Palaikastro, Crete, in order to prove that metalworking processes were undertaken in the area and to determine their extent. She documents ample evidence of metalworking, but acknowledges that further analysis of pottery and buildings would be necessary to understand the wider social development of the town in the context of the metalworking industry. Lindhagen examines the viability of diachronically comparing habitation sites in Sicily. He uses the Annales School's timescales to interpret ruralization and urbanization; specifically, whether Greek colonial structures were events or part of a longer-term process. The Annales School divides time into three measurements, the *longue durée* (the scale of geology and nature), *conjunctures* (periods longer than a human lifespan), and *événements* (events that happen in a short span of history, usually during a person's life). He concludes that "any archaeologist has to relate to different scales of interpretation; from the finds to their interpretation in a social, economic, or political context...more work has to be dedicated to the problem of how these different scales interact" (page 143). Taken as a whole, these articles present the successes and limitations of using isolated events and data to reach conclusions about macro-scale social and environmental structures.

The seminal tensions between particular (or peculiar) events and general structures are explored at length by Fahlander and Burström. An important processual question is succinctly posed by Burström: “how can we use archaeological anomalies and problems, interrupted processes, and hard-to-define entities as interpretational assets?” (page 76). Her analysis of typographical changes in Gotlandic coins demonstrates that researchers can learn about the long-term development of material culture from irregular processes, such as the reduction in image detail on coins as a result of greater cultural familiarity with symbols. Fahlander focuses on these peculiar instances as indexical events—as defined by Gell (1998: 12–22)—which can be seen as “symptoms or glitches in the cultural process” (page 56). He states that from Bruno Latour’s flat-ontological point of view, the general and local refract each other because they are essentially occurring on the same plane; that of our modern, limited point of view (pages 56–57). Different phases of European rock art on the same wall can inform how we understand the complexities of history particularly because they are evidence of multiple cultures interacting through time, viewed from a single modern vantage point.

The call for a more nuanced investigation of the components of process in order to create complex systems is elaborated more pointedly by Weiberg and Bondesson. According to Weiberg, “in a complex system small scale change in the smallest component may have large scale effects. These complex systems are therefore highly relative and contextualized analyses of the particulars of each part” (page 149). Weiberg charts the potential for augmented systems theory to inform Aegean archaeology, while Bondesson analyzes its place in the long-term change of legal systems. While Weiberg focuses on resilience theory, Bondesson examines ideas put forward in Luhmann’s *Social Systems* (1995), including the potential to use the concepts of autopoietic sub-systems, which are defined as self-creating and self-sustaining, to account for open and closed aspects of larger systems. Weiberg is optimistic that ‘complex systems’ thinking does provide room for much of what was deemed missing in early systems theory by the post-processualists” (page 149). Bondesson, however, admits that while Luhmann’s approach to systems theory does show potential for further use, it does not necessarily provide solutions to the inherent issues (such as determinist implications) that have been raised against it.

Matters of Scale pinpoints several key differences in how processual and post-processual archaeologists understand and value process, including the scale at which these processes occur, the perspective from which they are analyzed, and how predictably recurrent they are (page 1).

The contributors to the volume assess different aspects of process in the past and present, applying varying theoretical models to case-studies in order to respond to the critiques laid against processual archaeology and make constructive advances on its foundation. The volume's editors could have more effectively clarified the different types of processes discussed—including their scales and contexts within archaeology—by grouping them into categories. The important yet multifaceted issue of how archaeological processes can and should be studied and used to gain knowledge of history can certainly be glimpsed in the diverse range of contributions presented here, but overall perhaps exceeds the ambitious yet realistically limited scope of the volume.

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