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# Interview with Cornelius Holtorf

Douglass W. BAILEY\*

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Cornelius Holtorf is Professor of Archaeology, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden. He received an MA in Pre- and Protohistory from the Universität Hamburg, and an MA in Theoretical Archaeology at the University of Wales, Lampeter. In 1998, he received his PhD from Lampeter based on his dissertation *Monumental Past. Interpreting the Meanings of Ancient Monuments in Later Prehistoric Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, Germany*. Professor Holtorf has taught at the University of Lund, was Marie Curie Fellow of the European Commission, and has been a lecturer in the Department of Archaeology at Cambridge University. Currently he is Associate Editor of the *Journal of Contemporary Archaeology* and *Heritage and Society*, [cornelius.holtorf@lnu.se](mailto:cornelius.holtorf@lnu.se)

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**Douglass W. Bailey (DWB):** You have written about archaeology as popular culture. What do you understand by this concept? What are the consequences of thinking in this way?

**Cornelius Holtorf (CH):** To me, archaeology is a phenomenon of the contemporary world. Archaeology is not only an academic pursuit but to a large extent a field of interest that fascinates and even excites large sections of the population in societies around the world. Over quite a few years, I have been drawn to exploring that popular interest, fascination, and excitement that many people have when they hear the word archaeology. In that sense I was exploring archaeology as (a phenomenon of) popular culture. By popular culture I mean the culture that people make for themselves. To the extent that we all make archaeology what it is in our culture, we are all archaeologists.

The consequences of that thinking are profound. Perhaps most substantially, it really calls for archaeology to be a discipline about the present, not about the past - or maybe I should say it calls for archaeology to be about the past insofar as the past is a part of the present and exists today. I am not interested very much in the past that once was.

**DWB:** Can you work through one (or maybe two) good examples of how archaeology should be about the past as part of the present? I am sympathetic to your lack of interest in the "past that once was". Is there a "past that once was"?

**CH:** There is "a past that once was" in the sense that this notion exists among scholars and to some extent also in the population, based on what is taught in schools, the media, and so on. There are a number of disciplines investigating that past and there are many approaches trying to reconstruct it in various ways. I respect all of that work but it is not my own main interest.

When I say that for me archaeology is interesting mostly as a discipline about the present, then this means that the starting point of any archaeological research conducted in this vein should be a present phenomenon, not something that may or may not have occurred at a given point in the past. A fascinating example is the Bosnian pyramids in Visoko near Sarajevo. Semir Osmanagić and his supporters have been claiming since 2005 that several mountains in the area are in fact previously unknown pyramids of a lost civilization dating to as early as 12,000 BC. The global news story about a newly discovered Bosnian past featuring huge pyramids that archaeological excavations are gradually revealing was uplifting for some, depressing for others, and amazingly entertaining for others again.

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So here we have a fantastic example for archaeology and the past as popular culture. Caught up in assessing and refuting the details of the story, archaeologists have tended to miss the more significant dimension of this past that had suddenly emerged in the present. Illuminative for what that particular past is about is the following statement from the pyramid promoters' own email newsletter (26 March 2010): "The discovery of the Bosnian pyramids launched Bosnia onto the world archaeological map as one of the cradles of civilization... The largest pyramids, and potentially the oldest in the world, have been discovered, the highest quality ancient concrete and one of the largest underground networks of tunnels and spaces with multi-toned ceramic sculptures."<sup>1</sup>

The pyramids and their superlative archaeology thus serve to illustrate a sensational Bosnian heritage. Osmanagić is known by most archaeologists as a pseudo-archaeologist since the pyramids he claimed to have found are best described by most scientific experts as natural geological formations. But he has brought incredible world media attention to Bosnia in spite of this, and his activities attracted many foreign tourists to a poor country that has apparently had a strong desire of its own and met a strong demand by foreign tourists for a sensational cultural heritage. This raises all sorts of questions that I consider interesting and highly relevant for archaeologists to think about. In which circumstances can seemingly fictional heritage have a larger significance and impact in present society than genuine (i.e. academically authorized) archaeological heritage? What is it that tourists are really looking for when they visit archaeological heritage sites? Who (or what) controls what is and is not plausible about the past, and to whom?

**DWB:** Picking up on the issue of the past only existing in the present, what should archaeologists do? What does it mean to be an archaeologist? Can we even talk about being an archaeologist?

**CH:** To be an archaeologist means to participate in archaeology, to discover archaeological sites, care for them, solve mysteries about the past, and eventually reveal important insights of some kind. Loads of people participate in this kind of archaeology, many as amateurs in the literal sense of the word. Professional archaeologists have the responsibility on the one hand to facilitate archaeology in practice and on the other hand to study, analyze and critically assess it so that we are not naive but know about the consequences and impact of any such work in society. There are legal, ethical and political standards that need to inform the work of professional archaeologists.

**DWB:** Following this line of thinking about the past of the present or past in the present, what areas of study or knowledge or approach should students investigate if they want to explore this way of working? Any key texts or thinkers? What about important projects?

**CH:** Key thinkers who influenced my own thinking include the philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend, the historian Hayden White and the historical geographer David Lowenthal, even though (or because?) none of them is or was an archaeologist. Among archaeologists I have perhaps been most influenced by my PhD supervisor Michael Shanks whose early works about archaeology in society meant a lot for my entire outlook on archaeology. But I don't think all of these thinkers can be claimed to represent a single way of thinking, and I guess everybody will be inspired by different works. The same goes for projects I consider important.

Academic projects and their academic outcomes which I have found particularly interesting concerning the role of the past in the present include the Swedish ethnologist Lotten Gustafsson's *Den förtrollade zonen. Lekar med tid, rum och identitet under Medeltidsveckan på Gotland* (2002) and the American archaeologist John Whittaker's *American Flintknappers* (2004). I also like a lot the American art historian W J T Mitchell's *The Last Dinosaur Book* (1998), especially because I have never understood my colleagues who refuse to address the topic of dinosaurs although clearly in popular culture it is part of archaeology.

All three studies are based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, and I would think that ethnography is a very important methodology even for archaeologists. Moving to another genre, a

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<sup>1</sup> See 2012 Forum: The limits of collaboration. Osmanagić in the campus *Arqueologia Publica: Online Journal in Public Archaeology* 2, 44-51, available via <http://www.arqueologiapublica.es/>

fantastic German collection of topical case-studies and examples is the anthology *Dino, Zeus and Asterix. Zeitzzeuge Archäologie in Werbung, Kunst und Alltag heute*, edited by Inken Jensen (2002) and featuring papers mostly written by archaeologists, including an early paper in this direction by myself. Later I tried to follow in the footsteps of all this work in *From Stonehenge to Las Vegas* (2005) and *Archaeology is a Brand!* (2007).

Having said all that I also admire a particularly different tradition in which the past is studied as a part of the present, the critical tradition. Perhaps the single most impressive book I ever read is historical archaeologist Mark Leone's academic legacy in *The Archaeology of Liberty in an American Capital. Excavations in Annapolis* (2005). I am trying to make an impact on society myself right now in an on-going project on long-term communication in relation to final depositories of nuclear waste but I doubt I will ever be able to even come close to Leone's amazing achievements. This is a very different line of research though, and it is not linked to popular culture.

**DWB:** The ways in which archaeology is practiced (both in terms of method and thought) change with time and context. What is the current state of the discipline in your region? What were the significant local changes (in the discipline or out of it) that have helped to make it what it is today? Where is it heading? What are the challenges and obstacles?

**CH:** My current region is Sweden but I did not study here. I learned Swedish a decade ago, and I don't feel particularly knowledgeable or interested in the archaeology of this region. I just live and am employed here. This in itself may reflect a trend in Swedish and indeed European archaeology: professional mobility appears to be growing.

It is always dangerous to generalize, even concerning a relatively small country like Sweden. Generally, I think it is fair to say though that Swedish university archaeology is relatively open for all kinds of trends, and this has led to many developments over the years. Most things are tried out by the contemporary doctoral students. As a result, many innovative studies are published in Swedish anthologies and journals (see e.g. the Anglophone journal *Current Swedish Archaeology*).

An interesting question is whether there actually is a distinct Swedish - or perhaps Scandinavian? - archaeology beyond its distinct empirical material or whether Swedish archaeology mostly reflects trends that originated elsewhere. Until the 1970s German archaeology was very influential in Sweden and many Swedish archaeologists published in German. Since then Anglo-American archaeology has taken over that role. Who knows whether in the future we will look towards China!

**DWB:** What are you working on now? How does this fit into your earlier publications and projects? Do you have a particular audience (or different audiences) in mind when you start projects or write them up for publication?

**CH:** I am always working on a number of different projects. Right now this includes for instance, as I mentioned earlier, a project on the transmission of information into the long-term future in relation to final depositories of nuclear waste. This project is funded in part by the Swedish nuclear waste industry, and one of the issues we are investigating is how to think about human beings across very long time-periods – except this time the humans we are concerned with live in the future rather than the past. Another current project is on the archaeology of time travel. More and more people are currently interested not only in intellectually learning about the past but also in sensually experiencing the past, both virtually and embodied. We think this time travel research will be funded in the future! I am also always thinking about the archaeology of zoos and occasionally I write or present papers on that matter too. Recently a paper came out in which I discuss material animals, arguing that non-living animals should be taken more seriously as part of the overall zoo experience. A new line of research I am trying to develop is about enhancing senior citizens' quality of life through cultural heritage. So this is all very different stuff and has little or nothing to do with archaeology as popular culture, although time travelling in particular has a strong popular dimension in the ubiquity of role-play, reenactment, and living history.

My work is never directed at an audience in the sense that I really wish to persuade anybody of something in particular. I don't think most of my work has a deeply felt message that I try to get across; I am not an academic missionary. This may surprise some readers because sometimes I like to write in a strongly argumentative and polemic way advocating one position over another. However, I normally do this more for the sake of the argument in a particular intellectual genre than out of real concern for a certain effect of my message. My aim is mostly to have a great discussion rather than to make people directly change their minds or their actions. The audience I write for, really, is the audience that appreciates such discussion. The ultimate quality I aspire my work to have – although I often fail – is a kind of academic beauty.

**DWB:** What does a beautiful piece of work look like?

**CH:** To me, academic beauty is about the formal qualities of a work. Illustrations, for example, are important to me, especially to the extent that they enter into a dialogue with the written text, so that they do not merely illustrate the words but have a bit of a life of their own as part of a particular argument. I do not separate formal qualities from the quality of content though. Indeed, some of my best work I consider academically beautiful in the sense that, to me, it is a beautiful argument in a particular genre. The argument may take a question into a new direction, or it may develop a given position in a particular, radical way. I am not too concerned whether I am right or wrong. In fact I'd rather be wrong, but in a beautiful way that makes the reader smile.

**DWB:** What advice would you give to early career Romanian archaeologists about how to manage their careers, especially the balance of working with/against the main conclusions of their supervisors or the big names in the field? What sort of experiences should they pursue in order to develop their critical and analytical and interpretive senses?

**CH:** It really depends on everybody's individual ideas of what a good career means and how they wish to combine life and work. As far as I am concerned, I enjoyed and benefitted a lot from a certain capacity and confidence that I think I have to rethink and challenge conventional (archaeological) wisdoms. At certain points in time, that also included the wisdom of my supervisors. I do not think this has ever been to my disadvantage! But I have to say that my career has always been very important in my life, in the sense that I thrive most while speeding in an academic sports car on the intellectual motorways of archaeology. Also, I have no real roots where I grew up, and until I had children of my own I found it easy to move between countries, following some of those motorways all the way to their ends as it were. I realize that many early career archaeologists live different lives and have different aspirations. I will say nevertheless that I think that everybody will benefit from spending one or more years studying or working outside their home country, to broaden horizons, put things into a larger perspective, and not the least to improve language skills.

**DWB:** If you were to be stranded on a desert island, what book or books would you want to have with you, and what luxury would you want to have?

**CH:** I choose two of my favourite archaeological books, *The Dictionary of Imaginary Places* (2000) and *The 101 Most Influential People Who Never Lived* (2006). If I would take the collective works of a single author it would be Sam Ita's amazing pop-up Classics. As a luxury I think it would be nice to have a laptop with unlimited battery and free wifi so I can remain in touch with everybody via Facebook. Although arguably, this is not a luxury.

◆ **Selected publications**

- 2013 "Material Animals. An Archaeology of Contemporary Zoo Experiences", in P. Graves-Brown, R. Harrison, A. Piccini (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World*, p. 627-641, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- 2013 The zoo as a realm of memory, *Anthropological Journal of European Cultures* 22(1), p. 98-114.
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- 2013 On pastness: a reconsideration of materiality in archaeological object authenticity, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 86, p. 427-444.
- 2013 (with A. Högberg) "Heritage Futures and the Future of Heritage", in S. Bergerbrant, S. Sabatini (eds.), *Counterpoint: Essays in Archaeology and Heritage Studies in Honour of Professor Kristian Kristiansen*, p. 739-746, BAR I.S., 2508, Oxford Archaeopress.
- 2013 (with Graham Fairclough) "The New Heritage and re-shapings of the past", in A. González-Ruibal (ed.), *Reclaiming Archaeology. Beyond the Tropes of Modernity*, p. 197-210, Routledge, London and New York.
- 2013 "The Past People Want: Heritage for the Majority?" in G. Scarre, R. Coningham (eds.), *Appropriating the Past. Philosophical Perspectives on the Practice of Archaeology*, p. 63-81, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- 2012 (edited with A. Bauer, M. Díaz-Andreu, E. Waterton and N. Silberman) *The Oxford Companion to Archaeology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York.
- 2012 *Search the Past – Find the Present. Qualities of Archaeology and Heritage in Contemporary Society*, Archaeopress, Oxford.
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- 2009 A European perspective on indigenous and immigrant archaeologies, *World Archaeology*, 41 (4), p. 672-681.
- 2008 Zoos as heritage: an archaeological perspective, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 14 (1), p. 3-9.
- 2008 (with O. Ortman) Endangerment and Conservation Ethos in Natural and Cultural Heritage: The Case of Zoos and Archaeological Sites, *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14 (1), p. 74-90.

- 2000-2008 *Monumental Past: The Life-histories of Megalithic Monuments in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Germany)*, electronic monograph, University of Toronto: Centre for Instructional Technology Development, <http://hdl.handle.net/1807/245>.
- 2007 "An archaeological fashion show: how archaeologists dress and how they are portrayed in the media", in T. Clack, M. Brittain (eds.), *Archaeology and the Media*, p. 69-88, Left Coast Press, Walnut Creek.
- 2007 "Time travel: a new perspective on the distant past", in B. Hårdh, K. Jennbert, D. Olausson (eds.), *On the Road. Studies in Honour of Lars Larsson*, p. 127-132, Almqvist & Wiksell, Stockholm.
- 2007 *Archaeology is a Brand! The Meaning of Archaeology in Contemporary Popular Culture*, Archaeopress, Oxford.
- 2006 Can less be more? Heritage in the age of terrorism, *Public Archaeology*, 5, p. 101-109.
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- 1995 Vergangenheit, die nicht vergeht: Das Langbett von Waabs-Karlsminde und seine heutigen Bedeutungen, *Archäologische Nachrichten aus Schleswig-Holstein*, 6, p. 135-49.