

Plus ça change? Balkan archaeology in search of identity.

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Abstract

Over the last decades, there have been numerous attempts to remedy the perceived delay in the development of archaeology in the Balkans, in the form of conferences, workshops or edited volumes. The frequency seems to testify that the progress is yet to be achieved. Two assumptions are common for these efforts: the archaeological record from the region is rich and highly relevant from the wider European and/or Mediterranean perspective; yet, the discipline itself is permanently petrified in the state of the outdated culture-historical paradigm. This assessment presupposes that the archaeological knowledge has been advancing along a unified trajectory and that at a certain point in time the entire research community operates under the same, universally accepted paradigm. Rather than to partake in the everlasting quest of catching up with the idealized mainstream of the discipline, it may be more productive to consider the ways in which the Balkan archaeology can contribute to the rich multivocality of the discipline, with distinctive experiences of the past and present.

Keywords: Balkan archaeology, paradigm shift, epistemic norms, knowledge transfers, standpoint theory.

Introduction ¹

The archaeological communities of the Balkan region have long been considered as petrified in the state of “arrested development”, remaining prevalently devoted to the outdated approaches and largely hesitant to engage in the theoretical debate taking place

¹ The arguments developed in this paper were presented on two previous occasions: the session of the European Association of Archaeologists Annual Conference (Budapest, 31st August – 3rd September 2022), that generated the present volume, and the conference organized by the Center for Advanced Studies, Sofia, under the title *Looking at Things in Southeastern Europe: Regional Archaeology in Search of Viable Futures*, held online on April 17-18, 2021. The invitation to both these conferences was framed around similar premises, encapsulated in the statement: “*The two main shifts that European (and world) archaeology has experienced and that have challenged traditional paradigms of interpretation ... have not had much impact on research in Balkan Prehistory*” (D. Heilman, M. Gori, K. Penezić, EAA Annual Conference, session abstract #362).

in the disciplinary mainstream (Babić 2014: 288-290). Attempting to move forward from this bleak assessment, it may be productive to reconsider the overarching framework against which the particular conditions of the discipline in the region are estimated and the implied delay (“persistence of the cultural-historical paradigm”) is inferred. Therefore, my aim here is to take a look at the ways in which archaeologists themselves make typologies of their own epistemic practices, the criteria involved and the outcomes of such systematizations.

From the last decades of the twentieth century, it has become customary to order the modes of archaeological knowledge into three distinct approaches: culture-historical, processual and post-processual. In this way, a pattern is created, presupposing some law-like force driving the development of the discipline on general level, resembling the mechanisms of unilinear evolutionary ladder of stages (Babić 2015: 899, 903-904). The units not corresponding to this universal pattern are perceived as anomalies, resulting from some inherent deficiency and/or inability of certain archaeological communities to comply to the overall laws of progress. The fact that the dangerous consequences of such simplified schemes of development have long been known to archaeologists (cf. Pluccienik 2005) has not, however, impeded us to adhere to this internal “three-age system”. It is beyond doubt that two periods of intense debates on the logic of archaeological reasoning occurred – in the 1960s and again in the 1980s, and that some basic concepts have been re-evaluated in the process. The incommensurability of these strands of research has frequently been emphasized by labelling them as discrete paradigms (Lucas 2016), evoking the work of Thomas Kuhn and implying that the turning points induced such profound changes in the ways archaeologists gain knowledge of the past, so that the entire epistemological base of the discipline is fundamentally altered. Accordingly, plentiful overviews of history and theory of archaeology, too numerous to cite here, are framed around these three distinct pillars of our understanding of our own discipline.

There is certainly merit to this line of inference, since organizing our practices into discernible “typological units” enables us to identify and generalize about their internal logic. After all, naming and classifying observed phenomena is the bedrock of any structured attempt to understand and explain them (Babić 2018: 11-17). The endeavour of archaeologists to make sense of their own interpretive toolkit therefore justifiably rests upon this generalized systematization, according to which three discrete modes of inquiry are identified and arranged in temporal sequence. However, it has been convincingly argued that the conventional sequence: culture-historical, processual, post-processual, in fact reflects primarily the situation in one part of the European and, to some extent, North American archaeological communities, and that many practitioners around the globe have been experiencing different trajectories (e.g. Chapman 2003; see also: Babić 2009, 2014, 2018). Furthermore, when transfers of already developed approaches occur from one academic setting to the other, these processes sometimes result in idiosyncratic hybrid forms, adapted to local cultural, social, intellectual traditions (Milosavljević 2020; Palavestra, Babić 2016). Consequently, even on the European level, archaeology appears to be a much more diverse research practice than implied by the unified account of its three stages neatly and utterly superseding one another (Babić et al. 2016). This theoretical unevenness is not peculiar to archaeology, but a wide-ranging consequence of a long string

of causes, ranging from cultural and historical, to economic and political, and reflecting the current state of global affairs (Radakrishnan 2003). Most importantly, it is my strong conviction that it cannot be resolved by prescribing a single target and a predetermined road to get there. Academic communities, just like individuals they are made of, travel diverse paths on their quest to make sense of the past, heavily imbued by their diverse presents (Babić 2009, 2014, 2014b, 2018). This is possible precisely because the conventional systematization of archaeological epistemic strategies does not account for numerous irregularities and diverging paths to knowledge that have always marked the discipline, transecting the tripartite pattern. Again, archaeologists need not worry, since the positivistic ideal of unified science, levelling (up or down, depending on one's proclivities) all epistemic regulations, has been questioned even inside the stronghold of hard sciences (Wylie 2000), not necessarily from the extreme constructivist position (Fagan 2010; Longino 2002).

Archaeological paradigms?

So, when generalizing about the modes of archaeological reasoning, fitting them into the sequence: culture-historical, processual, post-processual, what are we missing and why? Firstly, we may be putting too much faith in Kuhn. His now famous *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* was first published in 1962 and soon gained significant esteem, particularly among the young progressive academics in the USA universities (Bourdieu 2004: 32). Since then, his ideas have been widely taken to elegantly summarize the ways in which science operates, through gradual acquisition of knowledge inside a paradigm, loosely understood as a disciplinary matrix encompassing the state of a particular field of research, or a shared set of ideas, concepts and procedures normalizing the state in the field (Bourdieu 2004: 28). At the same time, contradictions are also accumulated, only to be resolved by overturning the paradigm and entering the next stage of scientific development through fundamental, revolutionary change of its very basic premises. The heliocentric model of Copernicus is the classic example of the utterly capsized worldview of the new paradigm, nicely illustrating what Kuhn had in mind when structuring his model of scientific change, underlining the kind of observations and knowledge he scrutinized – no less than the laws of the universe. His subsequent critics rightfully stress that Kuhn syncretically selected the instances of profound changes, with the aim to create a coherent narrative about the history of scientific shifts, and, even more importantly for our present purpose, that he did not discuss at all the mechanisms of knowledge production in the sphere of social sciences or humanities (Fuller 2015: 131, 134, 144). It is therefore somewhat predictable that the first entrance of the concept of paradigm shift into archaeology is dated into the late 1960s and early 1970s, when the authors adhering to the then-new processual approach were articulating their position (Lucas 2016: 2). The idea of a revolutionary change, founded in reliance upon hard-science principles, must have been very appealing. On the other hand, there is a long tradition of thought, pointing to the differences between the constraints put before the researchers who observe phenomena in the natural world, and those attempting to understand human affairs (Babić 2018: 57-63, *passim*). So, when the next tide of theoretical debate swept over the West European archaeology, emphasizing its ties with humanities, the concept was already

appropriated by the processualists and lost its appeal. Be that as it may, over the next couple of decades, the paradigm concept “*became normalized in archaeology, but... rather as a somewhat elastic term to label theoretical approaches which, on the one hand, could be deployed to create simplistic historiographic divisions..., but, on the other, simply referred to competing and contemporary theories such as Marxism, structuralism, or behavioural ecology*” (Lucas 2016: 3). This migration of the concept of paradigm to archaeology may therefore be understood as one more example of trading in “*thin descriptions*” – relatively superficial borrowing from another field of knowledge, “*bypassing the presupposition that there is any agreement among the people exchanging things about the full signification (or thick description) of the objects exchanged*” (Galison 2010: 36). In other words, Kuhn was not in the least interested in theoretical shifts in archaeology, and his focus was in his own primary field of study, that of physics (Fuller 2015: 130). As his ideas gained traction, very much thanks to the social, cultural, and political settings of the time (Bourdieu 2004: 32), the concept of paradigm shift soon became a universal shorthand description of the development of archaeological theory, as well as for the ideas borrowed from other areas of research, with lots of the original details being lost in this “trading” (sensu Galison 2010).

Admittedly, Kuhn himself left quite a lot of ambiguity around the term paradigm, so that some of the later authors counted no less than twenty-one different ways in which he used the term (Lucas 2016: 6), enabling lots of “thin descriptions” of his structure of scientific change, surely not limited to its reception in the archaeological literature. The huge authority that his work still enjoys rests upon its perceived ability to explain the sudden leaps in science and radical shifts in worldviews in ways different from the conventional narrative of continuous accumulation of knowledge, so he is often cast as the pivotal figure in the constructivist philosophy of science (Babić 2018: 33-36). However, Steve Fuller offers an opposing view, asserting that Kuhn in fact presents science as a self-regulatory and self-sufficient system, divorced from the society, in which changes occur as the result of internal, “normal”, and not intentional actions of the scientific community (Fuller 2015: 132, 136, 140; also: Bourdieu 2004: 29). The work of Ludwik Fleck (Milosavljević 2018), the not fully acknowledged inspiration of Kuhn, may bring us a little closer to understanding of the intricate interplay of scientists among themselves and the society they form an integral part of. Fleck’s almost total decades’ long invisibility and the subsequent rediscovery may serve as a suitable illustration of the tangled ways in which scientific knowledge is transferred, mislaid, or repossessed.

Among the many ways in which Kuhn’s paradigm concept has resonated among the researchers into the mechanisms of science, two distinct aspects may be discerned: epistemological – stressing that scientific communities share a common mode of reasoning (heavily leaning onto Fleck’s thought collectives), and historiographic – aimed at monitoring and explaining the changes in this shared pattern through time (Lucas 2016: 4). Although these two manners of deploying paradigm are undoubtedly closely related, the stress put on one of them may overshadow the other. More often than not, archaeologists have reached out for the tool to “*create simplistic historiographic divisions*” (Lucas 2016: 3), thus implying an unsurmountable epistemological distance between the three approaches identified in the history of the discipline. In this manner, a pattern is created, raising the expectations that this cycle of radical overturning of the basic epistemic premises of the discipline is bound to happen in regular intervals of several decades.

Following this pattern, some archaeologists indeed proclaim the advent of new paradigms (e.g. Kristiansen 2014), or turns (Olsen et al. 2012; Harris & Cipolla 2017), entirely overturning the epistemic norms of the discipline. The opposite, pessimistic reaction may be the proclamation of “the death of archaeological theory” (Thomas 2015) since no obvious contender is identified to mobilize the entire archaeological community.

Undoubtedly, the archaeological community of the first decades of the twenty-first century has not unequivocally endorsed any new paradigm, abandoning the old one(s). The Copernican Revolution did not shatter the very foundation of the archaeological reasoning. Quite the opposite, it may be argued that the landscape of archaeological theory is more fragmented than ever, and that at least several strategies are being developed simultaneously (Lucas 2016; Thomas 2015), from (renewed?) emphasis on hard-science allegiances (e.g. Kristiansen 2014), to shifts from epistemology to ontology as the main concern of the discipline (e.g. Olsen et al. 2012). Rather than take these developments as the sign of turmoil, there is reason to consider the current state as the potent multivocal environment in which multiple strands are being investigated, invigorating the discipline. However, the discussion is much more vivid in some parts of the global archaeological community, than in some others, such as South-eastern Europe, that may even be described as mainly forgoing the previous two shifts. There are certainly grounds for severe concern. The question is, though, how this unfortunate state of affairs can be overcome. If starting from the premise that the development of archaeological theory has been moving up the uniform and universal ladder of stages, from culture-historical (where some are still lingering), over processual and post-processual, to the current stage – however elusive it is at the moment, then indeed a very huge quantum leap is required in order to catch up. If, on the other hand, we abandon the idea that there is an inevitable force driving the discipline through discrete paradigms, each completely obliterating the previous one, we face much better prospects. This does not mean that we should disregard or minimize the importance of the fervent discussions of the 1960s or the 1980s, or the epistemic goods they produced. What we should take with much more caution, though, is the emphasis on the historiographic function of the concept of paradigm (Lucas 2016: 5) and its corollaries: that over almost a century and a half archaeological knowledge has been produced following three distinct sets of rules, perceived as mutually exclusive, each in its turn pervading the whole disciplinary practice and exhausting all possible paths. In this manner, at least two facets of our discipline are factored out, whose consideration may be invaluable for its future advance: its local manifestations, often adapted to local needs and intellectual traditions, sometimes even in deliberate and stark opposition to the mainstream order of the day, as well as the traits of archaeological reasoning that transcend the now conventional demarcation into discrete paradigms.

Archaeological reasoning

Regardless of the (professed or not) approach of individual researchers, all archaeologists produce narratives on human behaviour on the grounds of some material evidence. Although there are certainly significant differences in the ways culture-historical, processual and post-processual programmes conceptualize the link between humans and their material environment, we all start from the premise that there is some knowledge to

be gained by observing various materialities. Gavin Lucas (2012) discerns three ways in which these materialities have been understood in order to transform them into an archaeological record – a meaningful set of information, whose traits are prone to observation: they have been seen as historical records, as the result of formation processes, and as material expressions of meanings. Although at the first glance it may seem that these three modes are readily identifiable with the three paradigms, they may prove to be much more difficult to link to a particular time-frame, since they overlap and underwrite each other. In the course of the disciplinary history, particular aspects of archaeological record have been more emphasized, but none of them has ever been completely absent from our inferences, regardless of our particular research choices, or the “time zone” – both in terms of chronology and geography – in which the research is done. From this fundamental step – discerning the object of research, archaeologists move on to deploy a very wide range of theoretical and methodological tools, building scaffolding, quite often borrowing ideas and concepts from other fields of research and adapting them for our particular needs (Chapman & Wylie 2016; Currie 2018: 11). While engaging in this particular mode of evidential reasoning (Chapman & Wylie 2016), archaeologists often enjoy the benefits of opportunistic methodological omnivory (Currie 2018: 25, *passim*). However, this does not imply that we are not bound by any epistemic rules, since the internal and external coherence of arguments is ensured in this contrasting of multiple strands of evidence. The debates on the most reliable procedures have occasionally shaken the ground, and attempts have been made to prescribe a fixed framework. Yet, in spite of the avid debates of respective merits of deductive or inductive methods and their applicability in archaeological situations, it has been suggested that the logical structure of archaeological arguments, irrespective of the proclaimed (or not) theoretical position, has consistently been that of inference to the best explanation, or abductive reasoning (Fogelin 2007; see also: Campanaro 2021). Perhaps, after all, “*a common paradigm is not only difficult to discern, but even to look for one misses the point*” (Currie 2018: 313).

It may well be that all along archaeologists have been following the advice of Melinda Fagan (2010) and Helen Longino (2002), that good epistemic norms are generated through collective practices of scientific communities, rather than through abstract normative prescriptions. Their merit is assessed according to their usefulness, established in social interaction among researchers, so that the standards of epistemic justification (Fagan 2010: 93) are under constant reconsideration and prone to changes. The result is an “*enormous diversity and complexity of scientific practices past and present*” (*ibid.*), that cannot easily be subsumed under any clear-cut division into pure paradigms, globally governing the archaeological, or any other research at any given moment in time. The notorious turning points, when processual and then post-processual agendas have been articulated, may thus be seen more as the moments of exceptionally vivid debates among archaeologists about the usefulness of particular sets of epistemic standards, rather than the events comparable to the introduction of the heliocentric system. It is worth noting in this respect that the early programmatic texts of the leading post-processualist figure, Ian Hodder (e.g. 1982), in fact argue for the return of some of the elements of the culture-historical approach, previously severely criticized by the processualists (Lucas 2016: 3). When we insist on incommensurability of the solid epistemic units, we may be losing sight of the very reasons that made Hodder reconsider the state of the discipline two decades after the radical

propositions put forward by Lewis Binford. Furthermore, we may be building unnecessary obstacles for the newcomers to the game of archaeological theory, both individuals and collectives (Babić 2009, 2018: 131-135), urging them to choose among seemingly mutually exclusive options. Finally, we may judge that some have made hopelessly wrong choices in this game and remained outdated twice over. Hopefully, there may be another way to approach the situation in Balkan (and many other) archaeological communities that have not featured prominently in the theoretical discussions.

Archaeological standpoint(s)

The history of science is a long quest for the most appropriate ways of producing knowledge that enables humans to make sense of the world. One of the main aims of this quest has been to ensure the mode of observing and explains the world truthfully. Particularly with the advent of the modern age, truthfulness has been equated with objectivity, which in turn puts before the observer the request to be neutral in relation to the object of his/her observations. However, it has long been argued that even the most rigorous observation inevitably includes the observer with his/her abilities, expectations, and limitations, highly dependent on the standpoint from which the observation is being made (Babić 2018: 44-46). This line of argument has reached its explicit expression in the second wave of the feminist critique, in the form of standpoint theory (Harding 1986; Longino 1999; Wylie 2003). Although originally aimed at redressing the gender imbalance, the concept has been applied to any other socially and/or politically marginalized position, the other in relation to the dominant one. Our knowledge is structured by the social and material conditions of our lives, shaping our individual experiences. If these experiences are critically reflected upon, including the conditions under which the knowledge is produced and authorized (cf. Bourdieu 2004), the outsider's position enables a different insight and ensures an overall epistemic advance. Instead of the ideal of "a view from nowhere" (Wylie 2003) as the most objective and therefore truthful point of observation, this strategy aims to objectify the position of the observer (Bourdieu 2004: 128) and to articulate specific knowledge, shaped by specific socio-political circumstances. Thus, the inclusion of the underprivileged positions ensures a more comprehensive, and therefore a more epistemically relevant observation (Longino 1999), and ultimately produces useful knowledge, attuned to diversities of present positions.

Furthermore, along with epistemic relevance, archaeology is an exercise in creating the narratives about the past that are socially relevant for the present. Although this stance has been specifically articulated in many forms since the 1980s, and therefore taken to be one of the hallmarks of the post-processual outlook, even Gordon Childe – the very epitome of the culture-historical approach, deliberately and explicitly worked towards relating the archaeological knowledge to the social, economic, political problems of his contemporaries (Patterson 2003: 33–ff.). Almost a century later, some recent overviews of the state of the discipline assert that "*the growing attention to the present is a pressing practical, ontological, and epistemological concern for archaeologists today*" (Rosenzweig 2020: 284), and urge us, faced with ecological, social, political, and economic problems, to "embrace an archaeological agenda geared towards the future rather than the past" (Dawdy 2009: 131).

To meet the challenge, we are required to produce useful knowledge, relating our particular disciplinary skills to our present experiences and concerns.

If approached from this angle (standpoint), the variety of local epistemic situations may be considered, not as a problem of tardiness, to be solved by rushing along the strictly prescribed set of stages, but as a situation of otherness, and an opportunity to enrich the whole discipline by other insights and experiences. The call to produce useful knowledge of the past in order to partake in better present and future echoes the raising awareness that we are all afflicted by the current global crises, above all the climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic. At the same time, our particular local positions in relation to these overarching perils vary significantly, since they are the consequence of a long string of previous events, creating and maintaining social and economic inequality, both in terms of individuals and whole regions. These previous events are the very basic object of archaeological research, so it is worth bearing in mind that “*there is very little an archaeologist can do that is epistemically, ethically, or sociopolitically innocent*” (Wylie 2002: 22). Our standpoints matter, because they inform our epistemic choices. There are certainly universal archaeological concerns and agreed-upon procedures to conduct research. However, even the most basic topics of our disciplinary endeavours, such as the Roman Empire (Babić 2014b), can be observed from different positions, both past and present, producing new aspects of our narratives. On the other hand, the instances of transfers of predominant narratives from their original academic location to other settings have produced some dramatical misunderstandings, and delayed, rather than accelerated the development of the regional archaeological scholarship (Babić 2014; Palavestra & Babić 2016). This is not to argue that it is impossible for archaeological ideas to travel and migrate from their source to other academic communities, quite the contrary. However, the process is not straightforward, but may include a lot of experimentation and adaptation, in order to achieve meaningful results, rather than superficial mimicking of the mainstream ideas (Babić 2009, 2018: 131–ff.). In other words, there are no ready-made templates, suitable and applicable in all situations. Rather, an auto-reflexive exercise (*sensu* Bourdieu 2004) is needed to discern the internal logic, background premises and implications of particular approaches advocated in the epicentres of disciplinary debate. The field of archaeological epistemology is in constant flux, and it can only be enriched with insights derived from testing the suggested epistemic solutions from various standpoints. More often than not, the concerns addressed will not be identical across the globe. It may therefore be prudent to bear in mind that: “*The question is not... whether a theory is grand or small, or whether it is universal/global or particular/local, but what function a theory plays and whose interest it serves*” (Kang 2013: 2).

Consequently, there is little doubt that Balkan archaeologists have been much less prominent in the disciplinary debates than their colleagues from the western parts. This situation needs to be addressed, both for the benefit of the archaeological practice in the region, but as well for the wider scholarly community. However, the manner in which this (dis)integration (Babić 2014) of the archaeological practices is resolved depends on the way the problem is framed in the first place. If approached from the point of view of three paradigms, taken to represent discrete and self-contained units arranged in time sequence, governed by universal laws of growth, the archaeological communities not vividly partaking in the mainstream theoretical debate are expected to comply to the existing

pattern and to adopt the already formulated epistemic “packages” without hesitation. Conversely, acknowledging the diversity of practices of archaeologists throughout time and space, that transcend this pattern, may enable us to refine our theoretical toolkit, by challenging mainstream propositions, rather than working hard at adopting them. As suggested by Adrian Currie (2018: 290): “*the scaffolded, opportunistic and omnivorous character of historical investigation means that empirically grounded speculation is the way forward*”. Introducing various standpoints into this vigorous epistemic environment may contribute to its general advance in fresh and unexpected ways. This, of course, does not mean that the archaeologists from the Balkans are abolished from engaging in meticulous theoretical research, but exactly the opposite. However, in order to contribute to the general disciplinary debate with our particular insights, along with learning to navigate the epistemic obstacles in approaching the past, we need to reflect upon our present diverse conditions, their sources and consequences. This may be the most efficient way to take part in the efforts to build a more diverse and yet less unequal future.

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