

Mainstreams and minorities in archaeology

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Archaeological communities are still confined within the boundaries of modern states, their principal differences being derived from their size and the economic potential of their countries. They are basically of two types that differ in many respect: mainstream and minority communities. Their existence deeply influences archaeological work and the interrelationships between members of different communities, mainly by making communication difficult.

KEY-WORDS: archaeological communities, history of archaeology, isolation of archaeologists.

“There are large and small countries, and many are in between. The number of archaeologists varies accordingly, unless political, economic or cultural factors intervene; however, smaller country normally requires fewer archaeologists. Archaeologists’ intellectual excellence does not depend on the country of their origin and it is this excellence that makes them influential among other archaeologists and useful for humanity. They form communities that mostly coincide with political boundaries but language plays an important role in the process. The paradigmatic orientation of archaeologists cuts across communities. Some smaller, and even some large communities have not yet realised the benefit of the latest paradigms”.

The preceding sentences contain some widely accepted beliefs on which I wish to cast doubt.

To analyse the present situation, this paper will discuss relationships between archaeologists in terms of “archaeological mainstreams” and “archaeological minorities”. These concepts apply to archaeological communities, not to individuals, but individuals cannot escape working in a community. One of my principal theses is that archaeological communities, more or less confined within present-day state boundaries, are important and must be taken seriously. In view of the fact that most of the following paragraphs rest on personal experience, I shall mainly employ European archaeology as the basis for

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my arguments. Because many of the problems discussed here are burning issues, I shall not name individual national communities. However, being pressed by friends who have commented on earlier drafts of this paper, I reluctantly suggest that Britain houses a mainstream community, the Czech Republic a minority community, and that Polish archaeology is heading towards mainstream status.

In writing this paper my intention has been to describe one aspect of archaeology as it is, not as it should be. I am not trying to suggest that the present situation, as described here, should be changed through deliberate intervention by members of individual archaeological communities in order to create a situation equating with their understanding of justice. History has taught us that attempts to improve the world are rarely successful; they mostly develop from the view that someone, who knows better, is entitled to make others happy, often against their will. Therefore, I do not consider it appropriate to judge archaeology in terms of what is “right”, “fair” or “just”, to say nothing of devising methods of how to “improve” it. Instead of proposing deliberate change, I shall describe what I believe can be observed and shall attempt to formulate, on that basis, some more general points. That is not to say that there are no issues which need attention.

THE CONCEPT OF MAINSTREAM COMMUNITIES

The key terms in this paper are “mainstream” and “minority” communities. Any archaeological mainstream, and any minority, is a historical product and as such cannot be fully predicted. However, it seems that subject to meeting certain conditions, the contrast between mainstream and minority develops, sooner or later, in any environment.

A mainstream is constituted by an archaeological community which fulfills a subset of the following conditions:

- (1) It is a large community naturally diversified into university centres, possibly research institutes, museums, excavation units *etc.*, where all branches of archaeological practical activity and theoretical interest are “densely covered” by archaeologists, *i.e.*, where there are no substantial gaps in the range of archaeological research. This situation creates competition in nearly all areas of archaeology, enhancing the quality of archaeological studies.
- (2) Because of the considerable number of posts available there is opportunity for an individual to move within the community and improve his/her conditions. This represents a sharp contrast to the situation in the minority groups to be described later. The number of archaeologists is sometimes so high that they are not personally acquainted with each other; this increases the possibility of impartial refereeing when this is needed. Consequently, the overall atmosphere in the community is friendly.

- (3) A natural hierarchy among the archaeologists of a mainstream develops according to their academic and other achievements. The archaeological community is structured like a truncated pyramid with a broad base of specialists.
- (4) The archaeological community is supported by a culture fully developed in all its different variations. Archaeologists have access to a rich and fully up-to-date literature on almost any field of human knowledge, and they also enjoy the opportunity to maintain close contacts with outstanding specialists in a number of disciplines. Hence, members of the archaeological community do not experience isolation.
- (5) A mainstream society is economically highly developed and politically stable, and this situation contributes to the stability of culture in general and archaeological research in particular. However, stability is not determined by economics and politics alone; it also depends on the overall number of archaeologists and the structure of their profession.
- (6) The community has a common language used by a large number of speakers in one or several countries. Archaeologists are therefore able to communicate with other community members without difficulty; this is true both for spoken and written forms of communication.
- (7) There are many conferences and meetings, formal and informal, in which archaeologists communicate orally. This leads to a rapid dissemination of information without the delays attendant on traditional publishing. International symposia in which foreign participants form a majority, as organised by minority archaeologists, are rare.
- (8) The territory from which archaeological discoveries are made is large and intensively worked. Therefore, archaeologists have easy access to evidence of regional variability (and, of course, chronological variability) within their “own” territory, and are able to conceptualize such variability from the beginning of their archaeological training. Hence, they approach archaeology from a wide regional basis rather than from a narrow local view point. This leads also to a concept of “considerable distance” which differs from that of minority archaeologists (with whom it may be of the order of 100 kms).

HOW TO IDENTIFY MAINSTREAMS

It is possible to identify a number of additional criteria for recognising whether a particular archaeological community constitutes a minority. One is the practice of their leading members to publish regularly in a language spoken by one of the mainstream communities. Mainstream authors publish in their own countries and in their own language; if their books appear abroad, they are almost always in translation. Another marker consists in adding foreign language summaries to articles and books. However, some communities publish exclusively in their own

language. Very short summaries sometimes appear in mainstream journals, but they frequently disappear after a short time as nobody needs them.

The criterion of organising international symposia, mentioned above, is less reliable as there have been several such conferences lately sponsored by international bodies and taking place in mainstream countries. Another type of mainstream venture are “international conferences” in which members of two mainstream communities take part while a small number of minority archaeologists appear among the audience. Archaeological communities in some mainstream countries organise sessions where archaeologists from abroad are welcome, but these sessions are not considered to be “international”.

A number of mainstream archaeologists excavate abroad, and minority archaeologists do the same if funding is available. This is often not purely a matter of prestige as, in some instances at least, problems related to their interests cannot be solved on the basis of finds from their own territory alone (this, of course, happens more commonly to minority archaeologists). As far as I know, expeditions into a mainstream country from other countries, even if a mainstream, are not generally felt to be necessary by local mainstream archaeologists, and the reaction towards expeditions from minority countries is at least ambivalent. Anyway, such instances are extremely rare. A verbal experiment revealed that the very idea of a “minority” expedition excavating in a “mainstream” country seemed to be amusing both to the mainstream and minority archaeologists involved. When I suggested such an expedition, as a part of the experiment, all those present believed that I was joking. However, it is fair to add that at least one mainstream community in Europe is liberal in respect of “foreign” archaeologists working in its territory.

Although some mainstream communities believe that their archaeology represents the contemporary variant of the discipline, there are in fact several archaeological mainstreams in present day Europe which are more or less independent, and connected with different paradigms. In addition, other national communities strive to become mainstream, but by general consensus so far have failed to achieve this status.

Mainstream status is not granted once and for ever. There are examples in the recent history of Europe of a mainstream community losing this position, because it formerly relied on political power. It is worth noting that certain archaeological communities that belong to the minorities at present, could have been counted as mainstream in the past. Obviously, I am referring to the heroic times of Scandinavian archaeology; it is equally heroic today, but not mainstream.

THE ISOLATION OF MAINSTREAM COMMUNITIES

Membership of the Association of European Archaeologists (my last figures are from the middle of 1995) shows that archaeologists from mainstream countries have

yet to develop a strong interest in this organization. On the other hand, archaeologists of at least some of the minority communities reacted very positively. For the former group, very sparsely represented among the members (especially when considering numbers divided by the total population of the respective communities), membership does not seem to be attractive, while the latter group of countries strives to overcome the disadvantages of their minority position through joining the Association. In other words, mainstream archaeologists do not mind isolating themselves, while minority archaeologists attempt to overcome their isolation.

The isolation of mainstream archaeological communities cannot be considered to be their vice: it is a natural reflection of the indisputable fact that, in the present state of the discipline, they have no need to consult their colleagues either from the minority communities or from other mainstream communities. As they are autonomous in almost every respect, their isolation does not create any substantial problems.

This isolation takes many forms. For example, mainstream archaeologists frequently do not read papers written by colleagues from other countries, unless there is a need for factual information. This applies both to archaeologists from minority and mainstream communities and is not related to whether the work is accessible linguistically. Minority papers are only read to provide facts (sometimes classification), but their theoretical views such as interpretation seem to be dispensable. This is almost always an unconscious attitude and certainly not connected with nationalism. The reason is the mental autonomy of mainstreamers, as it is unnecessary for them to take into consideration what members of a foreign community think: similar views tend to be also present in their own stream. In any case, the views of outsiders will often be formulated in terms of another paradigm.

The acceptability of not reading outside one's own community is greatly fostered by the recent development of archaeological publishing. The amount of printed matter has so vastly increased in the last thirty years that it has become impossible to read everything published even in one's own community. This observation also applies to many minority communities. To expect that someone working in a mainstream country would also systematically follow the literary output of the surrounding minority communities is clearly illusory.

The problem of isolation is therefore much deeper than the nationalism of large nations and/or of the former great powers. We should not simplify the issue by referring to nationalism, if for no other reason than because many small nations also produce aggressive nationalism in relation to their minorities and their neighbours. Nor can the problem be fully grasped in terms of the psychological attitudes of individual archaeologists or the issue judged by ethical standards.

Isolationism of the kind described in the preceding paragraphs seems to be rare in the natural sciences, and more or less nonexistent in their technical applications. The reason is obvious. Knowledge wherever gained cannot easily be ignored as it tends to have practical consequences. Also, since minerals, DNA and beetles are

(nearly) the same anywhere in the world, it is only natural that the disciplines which deal with them are not based on regional differences. It is otherwise with most of the social sciences and especially with the humanities. The symbolic behaviour of humans has created such a diversity of forms that social sciences have become clearly regionalised disciplines. What is true for the Neolithic of Ireland need not apply to the territory of the Czech Republic. In such a situation it does not make any great difference if something is missed, and it certainly has no practical consequences. Present day archaeologists can afford to isolate themselves.

THE ISOLATION OF MINORITY ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Although most minority archaeologists do not realise it, their impact upon the development of world archaeology is negligible. Even if they discover something of general interest, it is very likely that sooner or later the same ideas will emerge in one of the mainstreams, and a mainstream archaeologist will be considered to be the author of the idea. The effort of minority archaeologists transcends the boundaries of their community mostly in the form of finds, if these finds are accepted as important by mainstream archaeologists. Sometimes, minority archaeologists are not even left to become authorities in the archaeology of their own countries: if an archaeologist from a mainstream community happens to write a survey of the prehistory of Stocklandia, this will become the standard reference, not the work of the Stocklandian author(s). It is not difficult to quote examples to the contrary, but such examples do not change the overall pattern.

A minority archaeologist, unless content with practising incomplete archaeology, must fill his/her own community's gaps by importing certain parts and certain aspects of archaeology from other communities. This is mostly achieved by joining one of the mainstream communities intellectually.

This solution is supposed to work in such a way that the archaeologist learns the language of the respective mainstream community, participates in some of its conferences and makes friends with archaeologists from the mainstream country. He/she usually adopts the ruling paradigm of the mainstream, and frequently publishes in the mainstream language. Sooner or later, however, he/she discovers that it is not enough to be accepted as a full member of the mainstream community: he is still treated like a foreigner. Full integration into a community, mainstream or minority, requires much more. It certainly means adopting the accepted set of problems and concepts, the same standards of communication (both written and oral), and the same set of authorities. It does not require speaking the mainstream language without an accent, but deviation from the norm must not be greater than that accepted in the community.

An article written by a minority archaeologist in a mainstream language can rarely be the same as that written by one of his/her mainstream colleagues. Not only

may minority archaeologists use concepts developed outside the mainstream (and, therefore, not easily comprehensible), but they frequently refer to the work of their compatriots and/or to papers originating in other minority communities, while their list of mainstream papers may be incomplete, with some obligatory titles missing.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

It is often believed that mainstream communities develop predominantly on the basis of language. However, this is inaccurate. For example, Northern America and Britain possess the same language, but belong to two different mainstream communities. Also, as I have argued, a “minority” archaeologist cannot expect to become a fully accepted member of a mainstream simply by publishing in the language of a mainstream. The linguistic aspect of communication is certainly important, but it is not the main source of difficulties. Even if there are no language problems, communication quite often works poorly or does not work at all. Many other communication barriers operate, some of them more important than language. Their importance (or negative importance) is considerable because most people are unaware of them.

The flow of information between archaeological communities differs considerably from the flow of information within communities. The reason is that one community usually harbours one (or two successive) paradigms, one set of concepts transmitted by one system of (mainly) secondary schools, one or several styles of written language more or less imposed by non-archaeological literature, and a certain style of oral expression containing the same conversational taboos or honorific treatment of partners in a discussion (especially in relation to their gender and age). Even facial expression during a conversation differs in different communities and changes with the age of the speakers. Some colleagues may argue that the variability of all these features within any country is greater than their variability between countries, but this claim is not supported by those who work in the area of inter-cultural communication. It may be true that some of the differences are less pronounced today than they were several decades ago, but some remain and others become more subtle and, consequently, more difficult to recognise.

Cultural differences along these lines, manifesting themselves in the communication behaviour of mainstream specialists, will frequently be mistaken for their individual peculiarities, while deviations by minority archaeologists from mainstream communication norms may be pardoned either for the same reason or because those colleagues have not yet learned the “right” way of communicating.

Misunderstandings occur from the very first meeting (and subsequent meetings) when colleagues are offered (or not) a hand to shake in a completely unusual manner. Then, participants in the act of communication are either addressed by their first name (in the first or second encounter with the speaker) or, conversely, are

stubbornly addressed by title plus second name (suggesting an unfriendly attitude?). On one occasion a group of archaeologists reacted negatively to the fact that colleagues from a different community did not include “acknowledgements” in their written papers. “It is a must” said one of them. He was unable to understand that many archaeological communities do not use acknowledgements at all. The habit of acknowledging seems to be spreading, but not because of its moral superiority.

The “New archaeologists” were often reproached for using incomprehensible jargon. It has often been suggested, either openly or covertly, that this was to make them sound more scientific or that it was a device used in order to make comprehension difficult for others. The case reappears with the post-processualists whose jargon is again difficult for outsiders to understand. I believe that the phenomenon is a consequence of their new conceptual basis, and for this reason their thought cannot be expressed via the “old” terminology. Innovations, however, should not go too far. I remember a discussion between an American and an orthodox Soviet archaeologist taking place some time in the late fifties. Having overcome language difficulties they were both happy to agree that archaeology must be a historical discipline. Of course, their conception of history was so widely different that their agreement was in fact amusing.

This is not to say that archaeologists cannot understand each other. I am only trying to draw attention to the fact that serious obstacles exist in the process of communication, and that archaeologists underestimate the problem when they believe that grammatically incorrect or improperly pronounced foreign language is the main problem. I would say that language is only the first difficulty to emerge in the process of communication, a condition *sine qua non*, but that there are many other issues that transcend purely linguistic competence.

Most archaeologists in Europe study foreign languages at school but their working knowledge of these languages is generally poor. Perhaps the only exception is English in the case of those who went to school in non-communist countries within the last 20 years. Moreover, archaeologists who happen to know the language of another community, even a mainstream community, do not regularly use it for reading archaeological texts or in orally communicating with their archaeological colleagues. This fact can easily be seen when we inspect the lists of references at the end of articles and/or books, especially after removing references to figures and plates. The languages of minority countries, even those in the immediate vicinity, are not normally studied by mainstream archaeologists. Minority archaeologists are usually better equipped in respect of foreign languages than their mainstream colleagues. This is a natural consequence of their lack of autonomy. It is usually English for the younger generation almost everywhere in Europe but, not surprisingly, French prevails in some countries of Latin origin and German in some of the smaller countries of Central Europe. In addition, minority archaeologists quite often learn the languages of other minority countries in their vicinity.

However, as minority archaeologists mostly learn only foreign languages, not foreign concepts or ways of communication, they often misinterpret their mainstream colleagues, especially with regard to theoretical discourse.

Minority archaeologists are also frequently misunderstood. This may happen particularly if a minority archaeologist with only limited competence in the mainstream language, has his text translated by a person who does not suspect the existence of theoretical differences between archaeologists or ignores the existence of theory in general. The result may be a flow of words that is linguistically correct but does not make much sense. Another reason for not being fully understood may lie in a lack of courage on the part of the translator to drop the peculiarities of the minority language that carry no meaning, and to replace them with some similarly meaningless phrases in the target mainstream language.

As can be observed at international conferences, the problem of language is a burden for minority archaeologists. They are misunderstood by others because of their non-standard pronunciation, their inability to suppress the intonation of their first language, and because of the practice of reading their papers instead of “presenting” them – an inevitable consequence of their insufficient command of the language. Hopefully this may change in the future but for now much time is wasted by everyone listening to presentations which are only partly comprehensible. Unfortunately, what I say is based on many observations, and does not apply only to the former communist countries whose archaeologists were unable to travel abroad and consequently had a limited chance to learn foreign languages. Many archaeologists who speak their own mainstream language can also be difficult to understand unless their pronunciation is “careful” or at least “smart casual”. This is a further consequence of the isolation effect: mainstream archaeologists are used to addressing members of their own communities.

ARE MAINSTREAM ARCHAEOLOGISTS BETTER ARCHAEOLOGISTS?

As suggested above, minority archaeologists, as a group, are unlikely to have substantial impact upon the development of world archaeology other than by excavating and classifying their finds. Please note that I am speaking about communities, not individuals. The issue of individuals must be left to a more detailed consideration based on the analysis of particular data.

It seems to me that the average archaeologist of at least some of the mainstreams may be better than the average archaeologist of many minority communities. In emphasizing again that this applies to communities, not individuals, I am trying to create a niche for people like Oskar Montelius and his ilk.

The problem should not be approached from an emotional basis. I believe that the potential for intellectual excellence in any sphere of human culture is more or

less evenly spread throughout the world but that at present only some communities possess the privilege of creating the right conditions for the development of that excellence. The fact that a large number of Nobel prize winners have worked in the United States of America is undeniable. The fact that the majority of the most influential archaeological paradigms of the last 100 years originated in countries such as the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, Germany, the United States of America and Britain, is not a distortion of history. I have argued elsewhere that the individual ideas of these paradigms, and even whole systems of such ideas, also came into existence in other countries as parallel developments, but it is incontestable that the paradigmatic outsiders were not those who turned the ideas into widely accepted paradigms (diffusionist, nationalist, processual and postprocessual). Of course it is not important where the Nobel prize winners were born. It is where their creative work was completed that matters.

MAINSTREAMS AND PARADIGMS

The concepts of the mainstream and the minority are not directly connected with the concept of the paradigm although a mainstream usually creates a paradigm of its own rather than accepting it from outside. The emphatic refusal of certain mainstream communities to accept the latest paradigms or at least to brush up the old paradigm used to puzzle me. I tended to believe that this was due to concealed ideological attitudes, to the power structure in the community, or even to personal abilities, but this is clearly mistaken. The community simply cannot accept a paradigm from outside without losing its mainstream identity.

Note that two successive paradigms never originate in the same community. For this reason, the proponents of a new paradigm, in addition to proposing new theoretical ideas fight, at the same time, against another mainstream and, by doing so, identify themselves with their own mainstream community. The main thrust of a new paradigm is directed against foreign archaeologists.

Some archaeologists believe that the only division of contemporary archaeology is along paradigmatic lines, whereas in the view of others nationalism is the main moulding factor. However, although both factors undeniably exist, the mainstream identity of a community is also important.

Minority archaeologists usually accept a paradigm ready for use and, quite frequently, try to modify it. This, however, creates a situation where they belong to no clearly defined paradigm and their views can easily be discarded. In this century it was unthinkable that a new paradigm could originate in a minority community. As suggested above, mainstream groups would lose their mainstream identity by accepting a paradigm created outside their own community. Moreover, a strong force in the spread of a new paradigm seems to be by way of university students who

disseminate the views of their teacher. However, a teacher in a minority community usually has few pupils, and it is unlikely that a large number of paradigm-sensitive archaeologists would be found among them. This may change in the future.

THE FUTURE

The present situation in Europe does not show a clear tendency towards dissolving the archaeological communities based on modern state boundaries or towards an integration of individuals into a transnational community. I do not see any signs of the economic and political integration of one part of Europe having a major influence on archaeology. If any trend is visible, it is towards increasing the number of mainstreams, *i.e.*, towards a phenomenon that leads to an even more widespread isolation. The positive aspect of this development is that the quality of archaeological work executed within a mainstream, increases.

The basis for my belief that further mainstreaming of archaeological communities will occur in the near future is the overall increase in the number of archaeologists almost everywhere in Europe. This development may lead to the field of archaeological interest being densely covered in many countries. In addition the economic situation of some of the former communist territories is improving, as is cultural level of the European population almost everywhere.

There has been no indication so far as to what will happen to archaeological communities which are too weak to become mainstream. Over the last few years a trend has been seen in Europe towards a number of small national units which place emphasis on their self-identity, excluding large-scale integration with earlier more comprehensive groupings. It is difficult to imagine how an archaeological community in a country with several million inhabitants and a poor economy could flourish even if used to support national feelings, a move that usually leads to somewhat better funding.

The scene is changing rapidly even though it may not be ripe yet for a new more stable configuration. I would be surprised, however, if my description of the current state of European archaeology as contained in this paper, changed before this volume is printed. If it did, the preceding paragraphs may at least suggest an insight into the past of our discipline.

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