

**SARAH A. RICH & PETER B. CAMPBELL (Eds.)
CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHY FOR MARITIME
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Archaeology and philosophy may appear to be, at a first glance, two very different areas of the Humanities, the one focusing on physical, concrete *things*, the second onto the very nature of knowledge and existence. Yet this is only a superficial impression. Archaeology has long since adopted philosophical theoretical approaches to make sense of the material record: let us think of the influence of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology in the works of Hodder (1982), Shanks (1992), Ingold (1993) and Tilley (1994) as well as in the development of contemporary Sensory Archaeology (Day, 2013; Hamilakis, 2013; Skeates & Day, 2019). We also cannot ignore the contributions of feminist and queer theory (Mulvey, 1975; Saraswati & Shaw, 2021) in bringing attention to the issue of male-dominated bias in the interpretation of the cultures of the past. More recently, the focus on *things* as advocated by Speculative Realism and Object-Oriented Ontology, or OOO (Bryant, 2011; Harman, 2018a, 2018b), as well as their relevance to contemporary global problems, has a growing appeal for archaeologists. Despite the obvious contribution of philosophy to archaeology, two issues remained mostly unheeded: the isolation of maritime archaeology from the theoretical developments in terrestrial archaeology and the apparent one-sidedness of the relationship between philosophy and archaeology or, simply put, the apparent lack of contribution of archaeology to the advancement of philosophical discourse (Johnson, 2020; Smith, 2006). *Contemporary Philosophy for Maritime Archaeology* takes on both challenges at once, bringing maritime archaeology to the forefront of theoretical debate in dialogue with contemporary philosophers, as demonstrated by the participation of notable proponents of OOO to this edited volume. In concert with this, the book also urges to take an active stance towards the challenges of our time.

In the first chapter, the volume editors, Sarah A. Rich and Peter B. Campbell, state the two main objectives this volume aims to achieve:

1. *to help usher the rather alienated subdiscipline of maritime archaeology into the greater sphere of the humanities;*
2. *to issue a call to action for fellow maritime archaeologists to think about and respond to ecocide more urgently, more cross-disciplinary, and more responsibly with new interventions into old research questions (p.37).*

The authors argue that an object-oriented theoretical framework would offer the tools to contribute more meaningfully to the contemporary issues afflicting our planet. Speculative Realism, New Materialism, Symmetrical Archaeologies and OOO were created at a time of awareness of global warming to address such concerns. They are known as *flat ontologies* as they flatten the traditional hierarchies between objects, meaning they do not privilege the subject (person, human, mind) over the object (artefact, landscape, sea, ship). The core tenet is that objects exist independently of the subject. Being so heavily object-based, these philosophies are well-suited to archaeological issues. Campbell writes:

The central argument of OOO is that objects exist and possess agency, independent of the human mind mediating them, and we (or other objects) only interact with a portion of an object: their sensual properties. The real object is withdrawn from our perception. (p. 24).

Implicit in the flattened hierarchies between objects posited by OOO lies a stark critique of anthropocentrism. In their lead chapter, Rich and Campbell also identify in anthropocentrism, and in the divide between nature and culture, the root of the disastrous consequences of the Anthropocene. Indeed, the need for the abandonment of an anthropocentric perspective is a common theme throughout the volume. Such shift in focus can be seen in the way we look at underwater site formation processes: the transformation occurring when algae, barnacles, and micro-organisms that interact with shipwrecks is traditionally called biofouling, to underline its undesirable nature (p. 188). Instead, through an OOO perspective, these processes are nothing else but the continuation of the construction and conversion of the ship into something different, independent of human decision-making, something that Rich, Hamdan & Hampel (chapter 9) refer to as *naufragic architecture*, and as such, valid in its own right. Another example of shift in perspective is found in Campbell's 'Octopodology' (chapter 10) where the author discusses our limitations when thinking in the absence of surfaces: the ocean is often perceived as an infinite void between the seafloor and the surface. A shift to an oceanic perspective is necessary to overcome the limitation of surfaces, to begin to understand the sea: the ocean is not void and certainly not infinite, with human objects immersed into it and persisting (often in the form of waste) beyond their human-intended function.

A recurrent topic concerns the 'afterlife' of objects, and their persistency on the ocean floor well past their usefulness to their human creators. As Campbell (chapter 10) remarks, the notion that there is a gap between the distant past (when an object was used/created) and the ruined present is a short-sightedly anthropocentric one that ignores the life of objects after they were lost, broken or discarded: more often than not, objects' lives are far longer without humans than with. In the above-mentioned 'Octopodology', Campbell brings the example of the reuse and re-engineering of amphorae and wreckage by generations of octopi that provide new meaning and use to human-made objects completely independent of their original function.

Unsurprisingly, an object whose afterlife is of the greatest interest for maritime archaeologists is the ship. Shipwrecks and reused ships are at the centre of several chapters. Harman (chapter 2), Yin Han (chapter 8) and Rich, Hamdan & Hampel (chapter 9), building on Rich's *Shipwreck Hautographies* (2021), argue that the wrecked ship may be closer to the essence of the ship than the ship in active use. This bases on the more general

assumption that broken, displaced or incomplete objects may be truer representations than when restored. Harman uses Theodore Scaltsas' (1980) revisitation of the *Ship of Theseus paradox*¹ to introduce a compelling argument about the virtue of wreck and ruin. "We know", he writes, "that an object often becomes most itself when stripped from its usual context: when decontextualized or defamiliarized" (p. 65). A sunken ship represents a "weird crack" (Morton, 2016, p. 26) in reality as it entails a loose relationship with its own ship-like qualities (Harman, 2012): stripped of the superfluous *historical*, hot details, the ship is more itself than it ever was (Harman, 2019).

The OOO notion of objects has much in common, mutatis mutandis, with Aristotle's concept of primary substance', which means that... individual things are not commensurate with anything that can be said or known about them... In other words, substance is more fully itself when it loses details from one moment to the next. An individual is more robust the more capable it is of losing and gaining qualities than it is when remaining the same in all details. (p.71).

Chelsea M. Cohen (chapter 7) and Bjørnar Olsen (chapter 16) have similar standpoints on the virtue of the afterlife of ships, though not necessarily referring to sunken ones. Through the lenses of New Materialist Assemblage Theory (DeLanda, 2006, 2016; Deleuze & Guattari, 1987), Cohen suggests a new way of looking at reused ships as building materials. She calls to expand the scope of nautical archaeology beyond that of the sailing life of ships, to include the larger role that the materiality of ships plays as an agent between land and water. Along similar lines, Olsen uses the example of the Norwegian *nordlandsbåt* (northland boat) and its onshore afterlives as playgrounds, sheep pens and even houses: regardless of the many iterations of its terrestrial use, the boat connection was never lost to the northern fishers (p. 329). Borrowing from Richards, "ships are more than just ships" (2008, p. 162).

Considering that ships have long afterlives well beyond their original function, and that the ship may be truer to itself when stripped to its essential parts when lying on the seafloor, it is legitimate to ponder over the meaningfulness of salvaging and restoring wrecks. Whereas there is indeed a great pleasure in visiting faithfully restored ships such as the *Vasa*, or seeing the Bronze and Iron Age wrecks of the *Uluburun* or the *Kyrenia* from the comfort of a museum hall, several chapters in this volume explore alternative possibilities to what Rich terms *resurrective practices*, i.e., seeing the sunken ship as a dead ship, awaiting to be lifted from its watery grave by the saviour-scholar (Rich, 2021). In their 2022 paper, Rich et al. state: "the anti-colonial maritime archaeologist's role in the Anthropocene might be to reframe research questions, so that focus is directed toward interactions between marine and maritime, and that the colonial 'resurrectionist' approach that has dominated nautical archaeology ought to be reconsidered altogether" (Rich et al., 2022).

It is precisely following this prompt that Killian and Rich (chapter 5) call the attention onto the gender and colonial power dynamics imbued with Judeo-Christian salvific ideology surrounding ships, shipwrecks and the sea. An alternative to the traditional musealization model is explored by Lisa Yin Han (chapter 8). Yin Han brings two examples of shipwreck

¹ The *Theseus Paradox* poses the following question: if all the gradually rotting parts of Theseus' ship are substituted over time with identical pieces until none of the original remains, could we still say that that is Theseus' ship?

musealisation *in-situ*, showing how apparently similar modes of presenting the material (via virtual excavation, ROV videos, 3D models and expert commentaries) can have radically different implications. Yin Han takes the U.S. Bureau of Energy Management Virtual Archaeology Museum as one case study. This museum, which virtually showcases a series of shipwrecks in the Gulf of Mexico, does little to distance itself from traditional narratives of the *great man*, focusing almost exclusively on human-made artefacts and technology. In the second case study, that of the Nautilus Live Gallery of the Ocean Exploration Trust, whose aim is to show different aspects of the ocean, the same level of interest is given to the shipwrecks and to their surrounding ecosystem, to the fauna and flora, representing at least a step towards a less hierarchised perspective.

An even stronger focus on the marine ecosystem and its interactions with wrecks can be found in Rich, Hamdan and Hampel's contribution. The authors seek to move the focus away from the resurrection model by exploring the concepts of *naufragic architecture* and *ship microbial ecology* (chapter 9). The wreck, they argue, continues having agency regardless of human interactions with it: it retains a strong and perduring impact wherever it comes to rest upon sinking, at times, with disastrous consequences.

Ecological disaster looms heavily over many of the chapters composing this anthology. Edgeworth tackles the question in perhaps the most archaeological way possible: by the individual engagement with the strata in an archaeological section (chapter 4). The section in question, however, is that of a landfill being gradually exposed by the rising tides of the Thames Estuary. The chilling reality that emerges from Edgeworth's 'Anthropocene section' is once again the persistence of objects and their agency, this time merging into the deadly uncontained refuse on land and sea:

What the eroding section shows us is that inundated landfills can be a major source of ocean plastics too – that material dumped and buried twenty or thirty years ago can be re-mobilized by Anthropocene forces after a time-lag of several decades. (p. 99).

Edgeworth makes use of Timothy Morton's 2013 concept of *hyperobject* in reference to entities so large or so slow that humans fail to grasp, but that inevitably affect everything they contain or are in contact with. The eroding landfill constitutes a precious example of the point of interaction between two such great hyperobjects: the ocean, or hydrosphere, and the incommensurable mass of discarded human-made things and the terrible danger it represents for all on this planet.

As clear from virtually all of the examples in this volume, a major tenet of Actor-Network theory and OOO is that all objects, including ships, have agency. This does not imply intentionality, but rather the ability to influence and enable action (Latour, 2005, p. 72). How, then, should we regard those objects that enable relations of power? This question is at the centre of Claire Watson's contribution on what she calls *complicit objects*. Objects are defined by their relations and their agential ability to enact their relations. As such, they cannot be seen as neutral but rather as active participants of these relations. For instance, Watson clarifies, a statue (or any object) comes with all of its relations and allows them to irrupt across time – or to use Mircea Eliade's terminology, allows them to go from clock time to myth time (Eliade, 1971).

A complicity of objects approach entails 'that the analytical attention remains focused on the objects [while also examining] its functions in wider networks' (p.140). Watson

rightfully argues that an object should be understood as constituted by a network of relations that can be re-enacted through the very presence of the object. In turn, this implies a responsibility of the object (in agential sense). However, while Watson's approach can add to our understanding of the agency of objects within their network and rightfully warns against assuming such thing as object neutrality, her insistence on the attribution of blame ('pointing fingers') appears as an etic, moral imposition that may be misleading when looking at ordinary objects from the archaeological past. As noted by Olsen in the same volume (p. 325), good objects and bad objects are the result of the tendency to anthropomorphise things, and some objects whose creation was to all intents and purposes innocent (such as a plastic toy), may end up transformed into a hyper-monstrosity (marine and terrestrial polluting debris). As Ian Hodder (2012) argued, our relationship with things themselves may lead unpredicted pathways, it creates dependencies that restrict our choices.

Maritime archaeology is a discipline, or rather a subdiscipline of archaeology, that has always struggled with theory. This reason alone would suffice to make *Contemporary Philosophy for Maritime Archaeology* a welcome contribution to the field. But the volume does much more than introduce new theoretical approaches: it prompts to intervene more responsibly and more effectively and proves that maritime archaeology, if aptly engaged with contemporary philosophy, can be relevant in tackling the dramatic challenges of our era.

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