

# The empty sarcophagus: an essay on the limits of the archaeological knowledge

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*Abstract:* In this paper, we start off with the supposition that history and archeology possess a common theory. This theory is defined, not by the materials which the historian and archeologist analyze-the texts and remains from material culture- but rather, by the common reality which serves as a reference for them, the human past. Beginning from that point, we establish that the two bodies of knowledge, the historical and the archeological, possess limits, which are analyzed. In this sense, we emphasize the idea that ignorance of the languages of the past establishes a sort of specific limitation on archeological knowledge.

*Keywords:* Theory of history, theory of archeology, knowledge, limitations on knowledge, language.

*Resumen:* En este artículo, partimos del supuesto de que la historia y la arqueología comparten una teoría común. Esta teoría se define no tanto por los materiales que el historiador y el arqueólogo analizan –los textos y los restos de la cultura material-, sino más bien por la realidad común que les sirve de referencia, el pasado humano. A partir de este punto, consideramos que los dos marcos de conocimiento, el histórico y el arqueológico, tienen límites, que analizamos. En este sentido, insistimos en que la ignorancia de los lenguajes del pasado sitúa una especie de limitación específica en el conocimiento arqueológico.

*Palabras clave:* Teoría de la historia, teoría de la arqueología, conocimiento, limitaciones en el conocimiento, lenguaje.

In this essay we try to reflect on a problem that is common to both fields of theory of history and archaeological theory. That implies to establish a starting point which could be controversial because in the Anglo-Saxon world, where these very two theories are mostly developed, it seems to be accepted as an almost unarguable premise that both theories are independent of each other, what is expressed in the mutual disinterestedness shown by specialists in both fields.

# I

In fact, the question is even more complex, because the problem of the limits of the archaeological knowledge and, consequently from our point of view, the historical knowledge is outwardly inseparable from the general problem of the limits of knowledge, posed for the first time in a systematic way by Immanuel Kant.

We also seem to be going upstream in this point because, over all, historians<sup>1</sup> do usually underline with pride that History can give us a **total** knowledge. The motto of Total History was a *Leitmotiv* of the French *Annales* School, over all since Fernand Braudel's works, who with his three different durations thought to have exhausted historical knowledge.<sup>2</sup> Braudel and the other *annalists* didn't realize that all the historians claim to have been *total*. In the contemporary world, for instance, Leopold von Ranke, a sort of *bête noire* of the historizing history for the members of the *Annales* School, thought to be grasping the totality of the historical process of development. In fact, he conceived such process as an essentially political one, understanding History as having in the State-nation the almost unique starring.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Here most archaeologists seem to be some more modest, although see KWANG-CHIH, 1967, "Major aspects of the interrelationship of Archaeology and Ethnology", *Current Anthropology*, 8/3, June 1967, pp. 227-43 (p. 234); Lewis R. BINFORD, *An Archaeological Perspective*, New York and London, Seminar Press, 1972; Don BROTHWELL and Eric HIGGS (comps.), *Ciencia en arqueología*, México, F.C.E., 180 (1969), p. 13; Grahame CLARK, *Arqueología y Sociedad*, Madrid, Akal, 1947 (after 1947 edition), chaps. 6 and 7, among others, where one claims that Archeology can allow an access to all the fields of the human life.

<sup>2</sup> Fernand BRAUDEL, *La historia y las ciencias sociales*, Madrid, Alianza, 1968; about the attempt to display *Annales* School's ideas in Archaeology, see John BINTLIFF (ed.), *The Annales School and Archaeology*, New York, New York University Press, 1991.

<sup>3</sup> Leopold von RANKE, *Las épocas de la historia moderna*, Madrid, Editora Nacional, 1988 (1875); about him, see Leonard KRIEGER, *Leopold von Ranke*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1977.

The same could be told of the classical historiography, because -as stated by Luciano Canfora- Herodotus or Thucydides also thought to be grasping the globality of the historical process.<sup>4</sup> All those historians, both ancient and modern, are using a complex philosophical idea they were not capable of formulating.<sup>5</sup> It was G. W. F. Hegel, the first philosopher who thought History as a science, the one who knew how to formulate it.

In order to bring to light the logical structure underlying historical and archaeological thought in the concrete aspect of their limits, we are going to formalize the principles on which historians and archaeologists base their works without being completely conscious of them. These principles are the following three:

Principle of sufficient reason

Principle of preestablished harmony among events and documents

Principle of identity between reason and History

The principle of sufficient reason is an old metaphysical one of the scholastic philosophy, usually expressed as *nihil est sine ratione*. That means that everything existing in the world does have a sufficient reason to exist. This principle, also called “big principle”, was widely analyzed by Martin Heidegger,<sup>6</sup> and it is one of the keys of what he named Western onto-theological thought. It is a metaphysical principle shared not only by historians and archaeologists but also by scientists of every kind, because what it establishes in the end is that the world is knowable and explicable and we can give an account of it thanks to Physics, Biology or Archaeology. According to it, the world

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<sup>4</sup> Luciano CANFORA, *Totalità e selezione nella storiografia classica*, Bari, Laterza, 1974.

<sup>5</sup> In the case of the *Annales* historians, their contempt for Philosophy is more than clear; about this historiographical school, see François DOSSE, *L'histoire en miettes*, Paris, Maspero, 1987.

<sup>6</sup> Martin HEIDEGGER, *La proposición del fundamento*, Barcelona, Ediciones del Serbal, 1991 (1957).

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can not only be known but also explained through the principle of causality, the key of knowledge for such positivists as Mario Bunge.<sup>7</sup> That is to say, at last, that our reason is capable of using the world up, maybe because reason and world are the same, as Hegel wanted, or maybe because we simply believe in it, and as it happens with all beliefs, we can't justify it.

If everything has got its reason and all the reasons can be understood, it must be then possible the knowledge of totality. What's more, we could even say with Hegel that either knowledge is total or it is nothing at all. That identification of knowledge with the whole is unconsciously shared by our historians and archaeologists, as an ingenuous belief that can sometimes be formulated as a research program – so it is in the case of Braudel's total history.

In this concrete case, we are in front of a metaphysical principle, shared with some philosophers, almost all scientists and historians and archaeologists. If we pass to the second of our principles, we will find something exclusive of these later ones.

Historical and archaeological knowledge should indeed define itself as fragmentary because the past – which is not directly observable – leaves only some traces – not always intended –, that is archaeological objects and written documents. Historians and archaeologists ought to be beings of the fragmentary, of the provisional, and to be touched by some drops of fragility, as they are conscious of how ephemeral their work is. It is however not like that because they believe in another principle, formulated in the metaphysical sphere by G. F. Leibniz. For this philosopher, world is made up of monads, beings created by God but closed in themselves, lacking either doors or windows, that constitute an harmonious system because there is a divine plan in their cosmic disposition.

It's obvious that historians and archaeologists don't believe that but do believe that "the number of existing documents and objects is enough to give a global panorama of the epoch we are studying". It's

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<sup>7</sup> Mario BUNGE, *Causality*, New Cork, Meridian Books, 1963.

all the same dealing with the early Paleolithic, Pericles' Athens or the century of Louis XIV, at any case we can know those epochs' historical reality with the documents we have, although some of them are paradoxically named *Dark Ages* due precisely to the scarcity of documents they have given to us. We will almost never see a historian displaying Ludwig Wittgenstein's aphorism, according to which "about what one cannot talk, one has to remain silent". No matter the epoch the historian is studying is dark, he will always have something to say and what he (or *she*; genre isn't a protection against those three pointed principles) says will usually be the last word if he is a competent specialist.

It's no use saying that this belief is absolutely arbitrary, because there is no divine plan – a human one would be inconceivable – to have been charged of keeping for us precisely what was necessary to know the past. There are two reasons for historians and archaeologists to believe in such an idea. First of all, they also believe in the two first principles; secondly they mistake the literary effect of the reality their discourse creates with the perceived reality and, what's more, with reality itself.

The third of these principles was certainly systematized by Hegel in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*. There he developed a principle –exposed as well in his *Rechtsphilosophie* – according to what "everything that is real is rational and everything that is rational is real". In its first part, it is a formulation of the sufficient reason principle, but it is completed in its second part with something totally new: reason is developed through History and it is carried out in its own process of development. This identification of reason and History, a consequence of the Hegelian identification of subject and object,<sup>8</sup> entails an important consequence: it turns History into a global process, that takes its sense precisely in its globality, not only spatial but also and over all temporal. This Hegelian idea was all the same assimilated by Karl Marx and, in the end, shared by all the historians and archaeologists. If our colleagues said that between the

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<sup>8</sup> Ernst BLOCH, *Sujeto-Objeto. El pensamiento de Hegel*, México, F.C.E., 1962 (1951).

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historical periods A and C, there is a B period about which we don't know anything, then we would have to carry the beginning of History back to the C period, because this couldn't be related with A but with D, E, F, and so on.

All this implies that historians consider themselves to be obliged to accept these premises because otherwise they would not only run up against a problem of syntax of the historical process of development but also against another problem of incompetence, as much as they would have to admit they know nothing about historical periods that could be essential (or maybe not; by definition, it would be impossible to know it). Scientists do the same but perhaps with not so many complexes. Cosmologists, for instance, do accept they don't know anything about the Dark Stuff, that would give the most part of the mass of the universe and, nevertheless, they say quite easily they know, more or less well, the cosmos and its evolution since the beginning.<sup>9</sup>

It is difficult to know if physicists are more modest than historians and archaeologists but, to tell the truth, these later ones claim to be experts of the totality for some other reasons. We will see them.

History has got a story structure, as many of its theoreticians point; and a story, by definition, as it was established in Aristotle's *Poetics*, has to have a unitarian structure. Story has got a plot, developed in time with a beginning, an unfolding and an end. If we forget one of its protagonists we will not be able to tell it and the same will happen if we don't know any of its episodes. Indeed, we would be incompetent narrators. This is so in myth, tale, tragedy, novel and History. What happens to historians and archaeologists is that, either they want it or not, they are storytellers<sup>10</sup> and as such they have to appear as knowing the plot, the story that is the nucleus of History.

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<sup>9</sup> Michael DISNEY, *El universo oculto. El misterio de la masa faltante*, Barcelona, Gedisa, 1986 (1984).

<sup>10</sup> Michael SHANKS and Christopher TILLEY, *Social Theory and Archaeology*, Cambridge, Polity Press / Blackwell, 1987, pp. 13 ff.

When a story is told, the narrator and his listeners pay attention in a jointly way, what gives rise to a common belief, and as a fruit of that belief appears a sense of reality. That *reality effect*, analyzed by Roland Barthes in an already famous work,<sup>11</sup> is an individual or socially shared experience and it has nothing to do either with the more or less suitable perception of the totality of the real or with the existence of the real itself.<sup>12</sup>

Historians and archaeologists construct the literary effect of the real, masterly analyzed by Erich Auerbach and systematized by Darío Villanueva.<sup>13</sup> What happens is that historians and archaeologists mistake that rhetoric effect with a scientific idea and so they try to justify themselves appealing to the existence of a scientific method as specialists of totality in its spatial extension and temporal development. If they assumed its metaphysical premises, as Hegel did, they would be much more coherent. Hegel reached the highest point of his monumental *Wissenschaft der Logik* telling that what had been exposed there – nothing more nor less than the display of the structure of the spirit – was what God had thought before creating the world. If we think that Hegel's God, as appointed by Feuerbach, is in the end, the human being and that logic is the previous instruction to know the world, we could even admit his assertion.

Historians and archaeologists don't think the world before creating it, like God or like Hegel, nor reflect a lot before sitting to synthesize their knowledge because they fall in what we could call the fundamental paradox of the historical-archaeological knowledge: how is it possible the knowledge of the totality of the historical process from some documents not only fragmentary but also absolutely arbitrary in their transmission process?

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<sup>11</sup> Roland BARTHES, "Historical Discourse", pp. 145-155 in M. LANE (ed.) *Structuralism*, London, 1970 (1967).

<sup>12</sup> J.C. BERMEJO y Pedro PIEDRAS, *Genealogía de la historia*, Madrid, Akal, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Erich AUERBACH, *Mimesis. La representación de la realidad en la literatura occidental*, México, F.C.E. 1950 (1942); Darío VILLANUEVA, *Teorías del realismo literario*, Madrid, Instituto de España, 1992.

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Let's see then how is that knowledge posed in its inside structure from its least unit: the historical or archaeological statement.

## II

Western logic, as developed since Aristotle, has established the principle according to what the most reduced nucleus in which truth is produced is the judgment or the proposition. A judgment is composed, already since the Stagirite, of a subject, a predicate and a copula – usually a verb – that joins them. Nevertheless, it has been traditionally considered that the verb tense in which judgment is formulated is the present tense. The known examples are those like: “All men are mortal”, “Socrates is a man”... The past is almost never used – “Socrates was a man” – nor the future, what recently has given rise to the development of a special kind of logic that consider not only what is real in the immediate present but also what is possible; such one is called logic of the modalities.<sup>14</sup>

According to what we have seen before, historians and archaeologists like talking about what is effective –“what really happened” in Ranke’s formulation– and what is necessary, while they are ruled by the sufficient reason principle. However, in reality they are always dealing with what is possible, because the historical process of development was an open one. Even recently some historians headed by Niall Ferguson<sup>15</sup> have tried to rebuild fictitious alternative histories, by changing some of the variables of the historical process; for instance, what would have happened if Hitler had won the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War? This experiment has been a failure and it has had no follower after the publication of that book precisely because their authors forgot the factual weight of History. So we will

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Louis GARDIES, *Essai sur la logique des modalités*, Paris, PUF, 1979.

<sup>15</sup> Niall FERGUSON (ed.), *Historia virtual. ¿Qué hubiera pasado si...?*, Taurus, Madrid, 1998.

not follow their steps, although we do center ourselves in the problem of the past and the possibility.

In the process of knowledge, as philosophers describe it, we can observe the following components:

a subject, or a speaker, if we talk after the linguistic turn

a situation in which the statement is produced, called enunciation

a statement

We can say that a “S is P” type proposition is true when –and only when– it’s given a state of the world in which S is P; or –what is the same– it is true the statement “the cat is black” if we can observe a black cat. But, of course, if we can observe it now, in the present.

In a communication process based on the discourse, as it is that of writing of History or Archaeology, the statements are of the “S is P” type, and there is no “state of the world” in what that could be authenticate, precisely because “S is not P any more”, because that happened in the past but not any more.

In this process of communication we could distinguish the following factors:

a speaker / writer

a listener / reader

a statement

a sensation: that the statement is true or false, derived from:

an authentication

So, for instance, I think it is true what a speaker tells me “the cat is black” because both of us are seeing a black cat. But what

happens when we talk about the past? We have almost the same components but the authentication changes. I can admit that something was true in the past, at listening to a speaker, when I have got a memory shared with him. We both are living a common situation and we know, for instance, that Franco died in 1975. I feel that what he says is true because I remember it as he does. The problem in History and Archaeology is that nobody can remember the Peloponnesian War or the Neolithic; so the model of History-memory would only serve to the so called History of the present times.

It is also possible a second case in which the authentication is not a shared memory but a common belief. If, for instance, a myth is being narrated in a so called primitive community, we will see that the myth is talking about the past. Nobody lived that cosmogonic past nor the time of the origins and nevertheless everybody will believe the myth because they share a belief that is rooted in the common possession of a vision of the physic and social world, in a shared perception of the world, that constitutes what Edmund Husserl named *Lebenswelt*, a common world in which personal and social life is evolved. What is applied to the myth could also be applied to the religions of the book, that systematize in “credos” their basic beliefs and also to the political ideologies.

But in the case of History and Archaeology there isn't –or at least so it seems to be at first– neither a shared memory nor some common beliefs of a mythic or religious type. Which is then the authentication that gives credibility to the statements that those disciplines formulate on the past time? We could say it is a double one. On one side, we would have an empirical evidence: a state of the world that would be constituted by the shared presence of the document and the monument (or the object) before the historian's or archaeologist's eyes. And on the other side, and fundamentally, by the belief in the **method**.

By method it is called a set of classification and interpretation rules of a certain type of data that allows formulating a socially shared knowledge. The rules in which a method is based can be:

explicit, what is fundamental in such disciplines as mathematics or philosophy.

implicit, or acquired by practice, what is usually common in the case of the majority of the natural, social and human sciences.

When the rules are implicit, it's obvious that a method's practitioner is not capable of formalizing them. So, it could be said that that person **believes** in the corresponding scientific method. And the fact of sharing that set of beliefs with other people makes him to become a member of what is called a scientific community. Such group will be similar to that of our primitives that shared beliefs in a myth.

Now, in what do historians and archaeologists believe? First of all, they believe in the basic principles we have formulated in our first part and that could be called metaphysical principles, although the bigger part of them would be horrified by such name. But moreover they believe in their documents and objects, two types of beings that belong to the world and that serve as a warranty of their statements' truth, that paradoxically are not referred to them but to the human past.

The idol in the tribe of historians, to take the well known expression of Francis Bacon, is the document, or what is the same, the text. The idol in the tribe of archaeologists is the monument or the object, over all in the case of prehistoric Archaeology. When a historian or an archaeologist combines text and objects, it happens almost always that the document conditions a lot the interpretation of the object, as it happens with the classical archaeology.

Let's start by the historian. The historian reads a document, classifies it, analyzes and interprets it and, then he or she imagines a past that he or she expresses through a literary text, that is to say, a narrative text written in a natural language and not in a formalized language such as that of mathematics. All these operations are very complex and superposed. For its development it is also fundamental to take into account the presence of the corporation of historians, that conditions the vision of the past from which the individual historian

departs, acquired in his process of formation and that, at the same time, gives him the methods to interpret his materials and even the materials themselves, selecting them to form a part of the archives.

R. G. Collingwood<sup>16</sup> systematized the intellectual process that we, historians and archaeologists, follow in our research using the term *reenactment*. In order to explain it, he adds an example in which he compares historical research with judicial research, through his famous affaire: “Who killed John Doe?”.

If we compare judicial and historical research, we will see that both of them possess indeed some common features.<sup>17</sup> In History and Archaeology:

we want to study one or several facts of the past.

but we can't observe those facts directly.

nevertheless, we find all around a series of elements –John Doe's corpse– and clues we will have to interpret.

the search for clues and its interpretation will depend on some observation methods: the more sophisticated the better.

but those clues have to be interpreted according to some methods that show us which can be its evidential value.

the interpretation of those clues can carry us to imagine, to reenact the past.

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<sup>16</sup> R. G. COLLINGWOOD, *Idea de la historia*, México, FCE, 1956, (1942).

<sup>17</sup> The metaphor of the archaeologist as a detective is often used; see Glyn DANIEL, *Historia de la arqueología. De los anticuarios a V. Gordon Childe*, Madrid, Alianza, 1974 (1967), p. 17, quoting Robert J. BRAIDWOOD; Grahame CLARK, *op. cit.*, pp. 16 ff.; Michael SHANKS and Christopher TILLEY, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

as a consequence of that reenactment, we can know who killed John Doe and why did he or she do it, with what we will grasp the logic of the historical event.

In the judicial research, as stated by Michelle Taruffo,<sup>18</sup> we would have – in a way – similar features but also some differences. So, the type of evidences and its use, unlike the historian's case, are foreseen and limited by the law; they are only interested in certain types of events (criminal events) and everything is done looking for a concrete end (typifying of a crime and its penal treatment).

The following step would be to analyze the question more closely in order to see if, apart from having important elements in common, there is something that makes History as a method specifically different from prehistoric Archaeology.

It is texts (permit us the simplification for the sake of the expositive clarity) what historian finds mostly. Hegel told that the beginning of History coincided with the birth of writing and State, because in his opinion only from that moment on human beings started to possess self conscience and capacity for self-determination or, what is the same, to become really human. We could admit it if we replaced writing by language, although it is also certain that an historian will hardly be able to know a language of the past if he or she hasn't got a writing that had collected it.

A historian is then in front of a text. There are cases, such as many Greek funereal inscriptions or *graffiti* inscribed in different types of objects, in which the text speaks to the reader: "Walker, you who are seeing me, think that...", "I am the cup of...", "X made me". Nevertheless, this type of inscription poetics, analyzed by Jesper Svenbro,<sup>19</sup> is not the most usual in the historians' works.

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<sup>18</sup> Michelle TARUFFO, *La prueba de los hechos*, Madrid, Trotta, 2002 (1992).

<sup>19</sup> Jesper SVENBRO, *Phrasikleia. Anthropologie de la lectura en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, Maspero, 1988.

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Historians read texts that weren't destined to them. Many of them were not only not written thinking that somebody was going to read them in a very far future but destined to the present moment and to whom in that moment were living persons and institutions. Reading those texts, the historian gets into a disappeared world into which nobody has convoked him or her; although, to tell the truth, he or she is not really getting into it: they are only imagining it. Imagination has its rules, and these can be applied to the historical imagination, more concretely analyzed by J.C. Bermejo.<sup>20</sup>

The game of historical imagination is a very complex one, because in the exercise of History, the historian has to confront his or her moral, esthetical and political values with those of some other different epochs. Doing it, he or she can carry out assimilation processes: the past is the same as the present (something very easy in national historiography) or it is so different that it can be rejected as primitive, despotic, slavish or feudal.

History is a continual game of values, as at his time stated Heinrich Rickert.<sup>21</sup> In that process, using analogies is unavoidable.<sup>22</sup>

Analogy is, without any doubt, a dangerous instrument, because using it we can fall in the temptation of considering that analogical relations are identity ones and so, that analogies have got commutative and transitive properties, what is not true.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> On imagination, see Mary WARNOCK, *La imaginación*, México, FCE, 1981 (1976); Eva BRANN, *The World of Imagination*, Maryland, Rowman & Littlefield, 1991 and E. CASSEY, *Imagining*, Bloomington, University of Indiana Press, 1976. Concretely, on historical imagination, see J.C. BERMEJO, *Fundamentación Lógica de la Historia*, Madrid, Akal, 1991.

<sup>21</sup> Heinrich RICKERT, *Die Grenzen der naturwissenschaftliche Begriffsbildung*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1921.

<sup>22</sup> On the use of analogy in Archaeology, a general panorama can be seen in Almudena Hernando GONZALO, "La etnoarqueología, hoy: una vía eficaz de aproximación al pasado", *Trabajos de Prehistoria*, 52/2, 1995, pp. 15-30.

<sup>23</sup> On this subject, see J.C. BERMEJO, "Introducción a la lógica de la comparación en mitología", *Gallaecia*, 22, 2003, pp. 471-486.

Max Müller, an old mythologist, told with reason (and he was a comparatist) that one thing was to compare and another one to make mistakes or, what is the same, that analogy can be very dangerous. Once we have avoided these dangers, the historian, even not getting into any world nor liberating some maiden, hidden in the virgin archive (rankean metaphor which would give much to be thought to feminist historians), at least, through the operation of reading a text of the past, establishes some type of contact with anything.

Developing his reenactment theory, R. G. Collingwood told that the only thing History was doing was to re-think what other human beings had thought in the past. According to him, we will understand what signified Caesar's crossing of the Rubicon when we know what did Caesar think when he did it and why did he do that. Of course, that implies to reduce History to the field of intentionality. There would only be in it some characters acting looking for an end. Out of History, would remain every non-intentional act and all those non-human factors that condition human action. We could say that Collingwood's vision happens to be a clearly idealist vision of the historical process.

If History only speaks about what is intentional, then it is a History of the conscience or of the thinking subject. In this way, History could be, following Hegel, the self-unfolding of the *Geist*, of the human spirit and mind. But that implies to forget something that Hegel could not think of because it was going to be developed by Karl Marx, but something that Collingwood should have known: in History, human beings are free to act in the frame of some external conditions (geographical, economical, social...) that they haven't chosen. And what's more, we will have to keep in mind that the ideas that guide the development of our behavior don't determine unilaterally the being or the reality, but on the contrary, as Marx told, it is often the being what determines the conscience.

Having clarified this proviso, we have to come back to the contact with the text. August Boeck<sup>24</sup> told that Philology, a basic instrument for History, over all for Ancient History, is the “knowledge of the known”. That is to say that as the philologist is getting into the text, he or she is in fact not getting into another world, although it is what he or she is thinking, but getting in contact with another mind, another language and another *Weltanschauung*. Knowing what is known is quite similar to the collingwoodian reenactment process; with a difference. In Boeck, one is not trying to re-build the intentions that guide action but to penetrate in another way of talking and consequently of seeing the world.

We are now interested in considering the historical operation in its most elementary level: the act of reading the document. The construction of historical reality is a very complicated imaginative process which we can't treat now and which has been analyzed by different authors.<sup>25</sup> In the act of reading a document, the historian gets in contact with one or several “talking” subjects that produced their statements in some pragmatic situations that our historian doesn't know at first, although he or she tries to imagine them. If we use the term **life** as it was done at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when in Bergson's, Dilthey's and Ortega's philosophies life implied human life, we could say that reading an ancient document we grasp a moment of human life, frozen in time. We can't grasp events or situations in which statements forming the document were produced: we have to imagine them starting on that very document and on many others, and express them in a new text with our own statements, so creating a discourse –historical discourse– or a narration, if we want to join the nowadays prevailing narrative philosophy of history.

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<sup>24</sup> August BOECK, *La filologia come scienza storica*, Napoli, Guida, 1987 (1886).

<sup>25</sup> See a synthesis in J.C. BERMEJO, *Fundamentación lógica de la historia*, op. cit., 1991.

Let's stay in the intuition of the instant in the act of reading. According to Gaston Bachelard,<sup>26</sup> we could say that time, apart from being conceived as a duration as Bergson and the other vitalist Philosophers did, can also be thought under the species of the instant. In the case of History, the reading instant should be situated in the ambit of a threefold duration. Firstly, we would have real historical duration, or cosmological time in which events were developed, measurable by physics, chemistry and astronomy. Secondly, we would have the historian's own personal and social life; and thirdly, duration built up by the historian in his or her text, that was what Paul Ricoeur calls "time of the narration", that has got its own rhythms.<sup>27</sup>

As we are working in an atomic level, we are interested in the reading instant in the ambit of the duration of the historian's own personal and social life, atom from which historical knowledge (or narration, if we are narrativists) is then built. In that instant, we can say that we have grasped something thanks to our contact with another language. Behind a statement, behind a text, there is a "speaking" subject, even if we aren't "talking" to it. History is neither dialogue with death people nor with the past, metaphor that many historians like to use. The past isn't talking to us either. But we can say that we have taken a snapshot, that we have taken by surprise a human life fragment, momentarily aground in a bend of the river of time.

History is a rational reconstruction of the past, what obviously presupposes the fact that it is something constructed. Such construction is done using documents. Nevertheless, documents are not bricks with which that house of History is built and nothing more. These bricks would be the events. But what define a house are not its bricks but its forms. Forms depend on esthetical ideas and so narrativists, such as Hayden White, think that in the historiographical

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<sup>26</sup> Gaston BACHELARD, *La intuición del instante*, México, FCE, 1987 (1932).

<sup>27</sup> Paul RICOEUR, *Temps et récit*, I, II y III, Paris, Seuil, 1983-1985; Paul RICOEUR y J.P. CHAGNEUX, *Lo que nos hace pensar*, Barcelona, Península 1999 (1993).

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analysis the only important thing is form, even stating that form is content.<sup>28</sup>

Non-narrativist historians and even some moderate narrativists, such as Frank Ankersmit,<sup>29</sup> think that historical events exist apart from narrative forms, and they can be deduced from the documents and around them historians can establish a frame for rational discussion, what wouldn't be possible in the level of the big historical interpretations (Marxism, nationalisms) supported by the historian and that will never be deduced from events.

That fragment of human life we grasp when we read the document seems real to us because in this reading operation we feel that we have something in common with the subject or subjects that have produced the text. Both of us are speaking beings, we can achieve some degree of comprehension (unilateral, from us to the past) in spite of linguistic, conceptual and value distances. That is what makes us to think that in the interpretation of the past we also come up to understand ourselves. And what's more, that our being is a part of that past. It is the famous hermeneutical circle, thoroughly analyzed by Hans Georg Gadamer.<sup>30</sup>

We are interested in claiming the reading instant because everything starts from it and one has always to come back to it. But we are also interested in underlying that the passage from the instant to the duration is a not too easy process, as Zeno from Elea's paradoxes made clear some 2500 years ago. And it is not an easy passage because of the number of operations displayed from the reading instant. The sensation of authenticity that produces the

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<sup>28</sup> Hayden, WHITE, *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1973; *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Frank ANKERSMIT, *Narrative Logic*, The Hague, M. Nijhof, 1983; *History and Tropology. The Rise and Fall of Metaphor*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1994.

<sup>30</sup> Hans-Georg GADAMER, *Verdad y método, I y II*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1993 (1975).

reading instant is very different from the sensation of reality that gives the belief in a method, what is a socially constructed sensation. What happens is that historians try to make us believe that they are the same, a very necessary alibi for both effects (authenticity and reality sensation) to become unified, closing the circle with the immediate sensation that produces the direct reading of the document.

Claiming that instant sensation help us to be able to defend our skepticism in front of the birr narrations, reserving our credibility for those isolated acts in which an ephemeral grasp of little fragments of human life once developed in time can be achieved.

All those things happen in History and in the act of reading the text. We can now ask ourselves if there is also a reading operation in the case of Archaeology, making this discipline similar to History (when hermeneutical Archaeology is defended) or to Anthropology (when one wants to apply structuralism to the analysis of the objects or Geertz's thick description to the material register).<sup>31</sup> All that supposes to transfer methods created for the study of the texts, of the language, or to develop an investigation in the present moment in a living society, to some remains of the past that are not texts, that aren't containing any language nor much less are offering us, alive, some person's or social group's life.

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<sup>31</sup> On hermeneutic Archaeology, see H. JONSEN and B. OLSEN, "Hermeneutics and Archaeology: on the philosophy of contextual archaeology", *American Antiquity*, 57/3, 1992, pp. 419-436; on structuralism and thick description, see respectively Felipe CRIADO BOADO, "Walking about Lévi-Strauss. Contribution to an Archaeology of Thought", pp. 277-303 in Cornelius HOLTORF and Høkan KARLSSON, *Philosophy and Archaeological Practice. Perspectives for the 21st Century*, Göteborg, Bricoleur Press, 2000; Ian HODDER, *Theory and Practice in Archaeology*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992, p. 15.

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### III

We have to begin by pointing out, and that is something that taken as too clear is often obviated, that prehistoric Archaeology deals basically with objects of quite different types. Some of them can be the result of the human action (instruments, tools, weapons), made for certain purposes. They can also be non elaborated material remains but that can be the result of the action of the human being on the geographical, botanic and zoological milieu (terrain modifications, plants remains and consumed animals), being able to add to them even human remains, that can also be an object of research. These objects can be classified in two big groups:

those which have been elaborated with a certain intention (economical, social, political...).

those material remains that, not being a product of the anthropic action serve as documents to study natural processes that affect human beings of the past (climatic changes, illnesses, modifications of the ecological niche).

Nowadays main theoreticians of Archaeology, such as Ian Hodder, now and along the history of Archaeology,<sup>32</sup> usually confound the fact that behind the object that archaeologists study one can see an intentional, and so human, behavior with the metaphor after which these objects are telling us, or are wanting to tell us, something.

If it was true that historical documents weren't written in order to be read by historians in the future (something different is to be said of historiographic texts; we have to remember that Thucydides tried to build a monument for evermore), much more reasonably will we have

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<sup>32</sup> Ian HODDER, *The Archaeological Process. An Introduction*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1999. On this subject in the history of Archaeology, see Alain SCHNAPP, *La conquête du passé. Aux origines de l'archéologie*, Paris, Editions Carré, 1993.

to suppose that a knife, a pottery piece or a house were not built to be interpreted by archaeologists. Of course, there are monuments, over all architectural, built to stand out against the landscape (and there is a stream in Archaeology that states that it is possible to extract information about societies beginning from this feature),<sup>33</sup> or even to remain forever, as Architecture in ancient Egypt, which massive character made it easier to preserve it. But generalizing that intention of monumentality to all the material culture would be senseless without any doubt.

If archaeological objects don't speak nor want to tell us anything nor are human beings, we can't interpret them hermeneutically nor with the structural method nor with the thick description, but under other parameters.

Of course, we have to do it without the notion of language. Using such terms as "pottery discourse" or "architectural syntax" is nothing more than the product of the basic idol of the tribe of archaeologists, according to which it is believed that the objects that survive the past through the geological, physical or chemical processes are there for us to study them taking as a base the principles we exposed in the first part. And that as we talk about them, they are also talking to us.

When material remains are not fabricated by the human being they are usually studied by archaeologists according to the methods of the corresponding natural sciences (geology, biology, physical anthropology). Nobody wants to study them with methods taken from social or human sciences and so they are not going to be the object of our attention. Nevertheless, there are some authors that state that

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<sup>33</sup> See Felipe CRIADO BOADO, "The visibility of the archaeological record and the interpretation of social reality", pp. 194-204, in Ian HODDER et al. (eds.), *Interpreting Archaeology. Finding Meaning in the Past*, London and New York, Routledge, 1995; Christopher TILLEY, *A Phenomenology of Landscape*, Oxford, Berg, 1994.

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Archaeology has to use the methods of the natural sciences,<sup>34</sup> although this is a discussion in which we aren't going to come in.

What we are interested in are those objects after which there was obviously an intention, developing to it a theory equivalent to which we have exposed for the act of reading a document.

If we wanted to describe the act of having contact with an archaeological object –firstly we will consider an isolated object–, we would have to start by telling that the first question we are posed is not: who talks?, what is he or she talking about? Or what does it mean? But: what's this? something essentially different.

If the reading of an historical text requires the knowledge of the reading itself and often also the knowledge of a type of different writing and an ancient language; on the contrary, the contact with the object can be given at a much more intuitive level. Every person can find it and ask to himself what is it, without having to carry out a reading operation, as it happens in the case of the document. In the same way that a judge typify an act under the category of crime, the person who has an isolated archaeological finding subsumes that object in one of the types of known objects. If it is something resembling a pot, he or she will classify it as an object belonging to the type of pots. The object is so classified inside the **system of objects** that defines material civilization in a given culture. And that's all. In fact, there is a reasoning by analogy of the type: "pots have a form F. This is the form F. So, this is a pot". The conception of Archaeology as a systematic of the material culture is a classical option and also renew inside nowadays currents.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> See Lewis R. BINFORD, *En busca del pasado. Descifrando el registro arqueológico*, Barcelona, Crítica 1988 (1983), p. 25.

<sup>35</sup> Juan Manuel VICENT GARCÍA, "Un concepto de metodología. Hacia una definición epistemológica de Prehistoria y Arqueología", pp. 55-72 in *Prehistoria y arqueología. Actas de las II Jornadas de Metodología y Didáctica de la Historia*, Cáceres, Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Extremadura, 1985; Michael SHANKS and Christopher TILLEY, *op. cit.*

The difference between this classifying operation and that of the archaeologist is that this deals with a catalogue of objects that is not only that of his or her culture, or the catalogue of analogies of his or her culture's objects but a scholar catalogue that allows him or her to tell for instance "this is a bell-shaped vase" or "this is an protogeometrical amphora".

This catalogue of the archaeologist comes from the discourse elaborated by other archaeologists and that is assimilated through his or her educational process. In this assimilation, the archaeologist assumes that this catalogue is not only a classification system but also a part or the whole of the process called historical reality, what would allow us to talk about a "bell-shaped culture" or about a "protogeometrical period".

There is an essential difference between the historian's act of reading and the archaeologist's sensorial perception of an object. Historian reads a text in a certain moment of his or her life in order to make present an absence, to reenact an idea or a character, as Collingwood stated; reenactment that will always be provisional. In the case of the archaeologist or of the art historian, the same object which was present in a certain moment of the past is now present with the same shape. From this fact is derived the idea, exposed in many handbooks of the archaeological method, that Archaeology give us a **direct** contact with the past, while in the case of History everything depends on the interpretations. That sensation of direct contact would be seen increased by the physical character of perception of the archaeological object, in front of the intellectual character of the reenactment process.

But we find a paradox: the act of reenactment put us in touch, although ephemerally, with what a person told or thought, but the act of archaeological perception put us in touch with a thing. The presence of the object makes it nearer than the absence of the person or persons who talk in the document. But those persons were, at their moment, real human beings and so more or less near to us, while a thing will always be a thing. In a text, it is kept the language that, in a moment, was a part of that personal and social process that we call

human life; an object will always be a mute thing, at least if we resort to common sense.

But archaeologists don't use only common sense but also the archaeological method. And one of the features of that method is that it transforms objects into talking beings, so talking that some archaeologists consider them texts or even the language itself. We have already said that this is in a way a trick. But there would be in it a part of truth if we considered that the expression "talking" is only a metaphor and that the whole point ought to be proposed in a different way.

Behind an isolated object there is neither message nor a system of objects but an intention, in the case of the functional objects, or an **expression**, in the case of symbolic objects and art works.

Intention can also be defined as a "functional aim". Pots were made to cook, amphorae to transport liquids, craters to mix them up. And if we pass from simple to complex objects, we will say for instance that ploughs were made to plough and mills to mill. Behind that world of intentions or functional aims, they reveal themselves basically as fragments of social systems of production.<sup>36</sup> Because of that, a great archaeologist such as Henri Hubert told that the archaeologist is over all a technologist, that is to say, a kind of retrospective engineer. And so, Marxist archaeologists such as Gordon Childe conceived Prehistory basically as a succession of techniques

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<sup>36</sup> See Pierre LEMONNIER, "The Study of Material Culture Today: Toward an Anthropology of Technical Systems", *Journal of Anthropological Archaeological*, 5, 1986, pp. 147-86; "Bark capes, arrowheads and Concorde: on social representations of technology", pp. 156-71 in Ian HODDER (ed.), *The Meanings of Things. Culture and Symbolic Expression*, London, Unwin Hyman, 1989; "De la culture matérielle à la culture? Ethnologie des techniques et Préhistoire", pp. 15-20 in *Rencontres Internationales d'Archéologie et d'Histoire d'Antibes, 25 ans d'études technologiques en Préhistoire. Bilan et perspectives*, Juan-les-Pins, Éditions APDCA, (Actes des XI rencontres Internacionales d'Archéologie et d'Histoire D'Antibes, oct. 1990), 1991.

and modes of production or as the study of the processes of labor.<sup>37</sup> To understand the world of the production of the past isn't too useful the world of production in the present, over all after successive industrial revolutions. The archaeologist has then to resort to that old historical trick: analogy, studying the technical of traditional societies through ethnoarchaeology or resorting to treatises that systematize in their epoch all the techniques of the preindustrial societies, such as the *Encyclopédie* de Diderot and D'Alembert.

This interpretation of the prehistoric Archaeology as a history of the techniques and modes of production is a quite solid one, although, as everywhere, there can always be a margin for error in the interpretations. And if we add it to the use of natural sciences in the archaeology, for the study of climate, retrospective landscape, illnesses, and so on, we would have the impression that prehistoric Archaeology is a rather complete science, and so the principles of our first part seem to be fulfilled.

Nevertheless, that first part of archaeology has some clear limitations. We can describe farm and cattle-raising production, we can know the hunted animals... but what we almost don't know and will never be able to know systematically are the "production relations", using Marx's terminology. We can know by intuition the sexual division of work or deduce the social stratification but we will never be able to understand the concrete articulation of those relations and much less to know how those relations were lived or what was the same, felt and thought. Here we are on a different ground that some people give the name of "cognitive archaeology",<sup>38</sup> but that has a more extensive reality field.

Marx defined society as a system of relations of production that can be analyzed not only objectively but also scientifically.

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<sup>37</sup> Andrea CARANDINI, *Archeologia e cultura materiale. Lavori senza gloria nell'antichità classica*, Bari, De Donato editore, 1975, p. 85.

<sup>38</sup> Colin RENFREW and Ezra B.W. ZUBROW, *The ancient mind. Elements of cognitive archaeology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

Nevertheless, he also knew, although he didn't use this W. G. Runciman's terminology,<sup>39</sup> that close to the "mode of production" there is a "mode of coercion" and the "mode of persuasion" to which Marx gave the name of ideology.

The access to the mode of production can be reached in a more or less limited way; the access to the mode of coercion can be partially known by intuition by analyzing archaeological remains which indicate war, violence or (less easily) oppression. But the access to the mode of persuasion is virtually impossible due to the non access to the language and direct observation. Ernst Cassirer<sup>40</sup> said that the human being was a "symbolic animal". Aristotle has also defined it as "the animal with a *lógos*". Sociologists from Max Weber on and most of anthropologists are today conscious of that social relations have a double face. On one side, they can be described from an external point of view, in a more or less objective way (*etic*). But they have also an inner face that is which expresses how is it lived the social relation in its own terms (*emic*). In that inner face, we have to include the concept or the symbol under which the relation is lived and the feeling through which it is assumed. One thing is to know that there were slaves in the Athens of Pericles and another, quite different, to know what was thought on slavery and if it was rationalized as later would do Aristotle or not. And over all, it is very difficult to understand what did a slave think or how did he or she feel. Developing what Max Weber gave the name of "comprehensive sociology"<sup>41</sup> is very difficult having the texts in which the protagonists talk about their social relations and about themselves. Without texts it happens to be almost impossible because without knowing the vocabulary and the concepts that a person uses, it is impossible to know what does he or she think and much less what does he or she felt. In the case of the feelings, historians and archaeologists have enjoyed to carry their feelings and vision of the world back to the past. So, when one reads some Marxist

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<sup>39</sup> W.G. RUNCIMAN, *A treatise of Social Theory*, I, II and III, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

<sup>40</sup> Ernst CASSIRER, *Antropología filosófica*, México, FCE, 1945 (1944).

<sup>41</sup> Max WEBER, *Economía y sociedad*, México, FCE, 1944 (1922).

historians, to follow with the previous example, it seems that slaves in the ancient Greece were always about to rebelling; on the contrary, if we read a German conservative historian such as Joseph Vogt, it seems that they accept their condition with resignation and even sometimes joyfully.

The reconstruction of the prehistoric human being's feelings could give rise to an interesting work in which it would be seen either how ingenuous ideas on "primitive man" were transferred by the prehistorians of the past (for example, the *Urdummheit* or primitive stupidity in which our ancestors would live according to late 19<sup>th</sup> century German and English prehistorians); or as successive theories on the "primitive man", being of armchair-anthropologists such as Lévy-Bruhl or of field-anthropologists, were transferred by prehistorians to prehistoric humanity.

The prehistorian uses here analogy, there's no other way, but as Evans-Pritchard put it in the expression "if I were a horse". Evans-Pritchard said that armchair-anthropologists liked to imagine what the "primitive man" could think by putting themselves in his or her place. But it is clear that they are not in his or her place. And they didn't know it so extremely that their reconstruction of alleged feelings, such as panic in front of natural phenomena (a much dear subject for 19<sup>th</sup> century anthropologists), was as fictive as imagining what would a horse feel when grazing on a meadow: will he be happy?

These feelings projection is no more systematically done nowadays, although something of it survives when what is done is to transfer (anthropological, sociological, historical) models from one field to another, trying to fulfill the hollow left by the absence of access to the language and to the observed behavior, the absence of the *emic*. Hollow that it is necessary to fulfill if, according with the principles exposed in the first part, we aspire to a complete and enough by itself archaeological knowledge.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Defenders of the so called "process archaeology" such as Binford, tried to develop what they named as "middle range theories" to fulfil that [MyC, 7, 2004, 295-324]

Bemoaning the loss of an access to the language we don't want to show ourselves as western "logocentrics", using Derridean terminology. We recognize that there are non-linguistic expression forms, through the use of visual signs or forms, as they are studied by art historians. All that is true but it is also true that symbols are not isolated elements that can be catalogued in a dictionary that, classifying those of universal character, gives us the key of what they signify translated to a language in the strict sense. Symbols, as Lévi-Strauss stated, form a system fitted with a structure. So, in the same way that knowledge of isolated phoneme doesn't allow us to reconstruct a language nor, much less, to understand a possible text, the knowledge of a symbol out of the symbol system to which it belonged and out of the context in which it was used, can hardly give us an access to a spark of thought or feelings of the past, unless we project on it ideas, models or feelings taken out of other contexts.

If the historian can feel himself or herself desperate when he or she grasp in an ephemeral instant some ideas or feelings of human beings of the past (if he or she is an honest historian; otherwise, he or she will be a "one who knows totality"), the same in a higher degree has to happen to the prehistoric archaeologist, desperately incapable of grasping even the remains of those instants of life that at its moment had to keep our empty sarcophagus.

Let's follow with our metaphor. In that sarcophagus there is no inscription, because we are in Prehistory, to reveal us the identity of that who sometime was alive. But it does have a shape and can be provided with elements that are perceived as fitted with some content. If there were a method to analyze forms apart from language, our empty sarcophagus could have given us some knowledge of that world of life of an essentially symbolic nature.

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hollow. See Lewis R. BINFORD (ed.), *For Theory Building in Archaeology*, New York, Academic Press, 1977.

That method is the history of art. Many of its practitioners tried to define it as a “science of the forms”, such as Heinrich Wölflin,<sup>43</sup> and it is in a way a partially good guess. But as Serafín Moralejo has stated,<sup>44</sup> history of art is in constant tension between the study of the forms and the study of images, and the study of images, as at his moment stated Erwin Panofsky,<sup>45</sup> requires the help of texts which give us access to the symbolic world in which those images were developed. The method in which converge images and texts is the iconological one that anyway doesn’t exhaust the history of art, because it doesn’t take into account the presence of the forms that sometimes can be important by itself.

The world of the forms is a part of the world of the material and, the same as the rest of Archaeology give us an access to an aspect of social life that constitutes what Fernand Braudel called material civilization,<sup>46</sup> a world to which written sources don’t give any access. But this world is symbolically codified, because it is a product of the action of some human beings that without any doubt possessed a language, a form of knowledge and some forms of feeling that could be reflected in the objects that constitute that material civilization, but to which we can’t have any access merely from them.<sup>47</sup> Braudel points out how the development of capitalism can’t be dissociated from new forms of structuration of material civilization of capitalism itself. Marx also told that productive forces are inseparable from the relations of production that at the same time are involved in an ideology and so in a world formed by thoughts and symbols.

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<sup>43</sup> Heinrich WÖLFLIN, *Conceptos fundamentales de la historia del arte*, Barcelona, Óptima, 2002 (1926).

<sup>44</sup> Serafín MORALEJO, *Imágenes y formas. Sobre el método de la historia del arte*, Madrid, Akal, 2004.

<sup>45</sup> Edwin PANOFSKY, *Estudios de iconología*, Alianza, Madrid, 1969.

<sup>46</sup> Fernand BRAUDEL, *Civilización material, economía y capitalismo*, I, II y III, Madrid, Alianza, 1985 (1979).

<sup>47</sup> On goods and consumption Archaeology, see Arjun APPADURAI (ed.), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986; Mary DOUGLAS and Baron ISHERWOOD, *The World of Goods. Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996 (1979).

Because of all that, we could say that it is quite convenient to examine carefully that sarcophagus that is our emblem. But in doing that we will have to be conscious, unless we believe in the complete, closed and perfect character of archaeological knowledge, that that sarcophagus will continue being empty. At its moment, it kept the remains of something which was once alive. But that life disappeared and it is impossible to recover it. All the forms of knowledge have their limits, and their practitioners have to learn how to recognize them. Be it through Anthropology and the study of memory, be it through History and the study of the texts or through Archaeology and the study of the monuments and objects, we can only have a partial and fragile access to their extinguished life. If somebody thought that discovering a sarcophagus could have a privileged access to it, we would have to tell him or her clearly that that sarcophagus will always be empty and mute.

*Libros*

*Recensiones*

