

Week2, Monday A2

Theories and Theorists:

**Why Theory is Important for the
Understanding of Ancient Civilisations**

HPAH5006

**Ancient Civilisations: Comparative
Analysis and Critical Perspectives**

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What is a 'theoretical
background' how
does it affect interpretation,
and why does
it matter?



Why theory is essential: the relationship between theory, analysis and data

- ❑ data meaningless in the absence of a theory
- ❑ theory provides framework for conclusions, assumptions and interpretations
 - → patterns in the data constitute evidence for the (in)correctness of these assumptions
- ❑ analysis driven by a theory → data impact on our understanding of our subject area
- ❑ therefore: no well defined notion of ‘proof’ in empirically driven research → difficult to grasp?

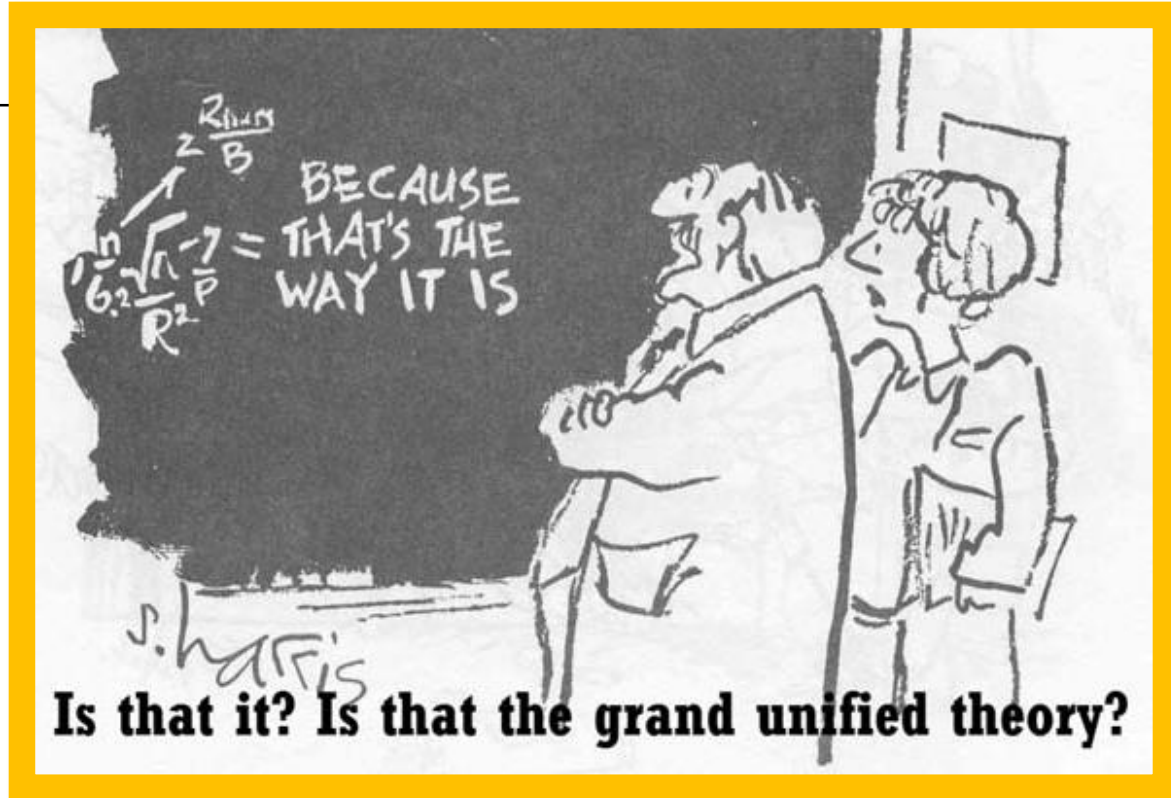


Why theory is essential: the relationship between theory, analysis and data

- Students need to understand:
 - theory is not simply a summary of the data → a common misconception)
 - Theory is a specification of mechanisms (loosely construed) which give rise to the observed effect
 - analysis is not merely a summary of the data
 - Analysis is attempt to discover how well the mechanisms of the theory uncover meaningful patterns in the data
- Will learn to appreciate this ;-)

Theory – what should we think about?

- Thinking About Social Worlds
 - How do we know what we know?
 - How do we interpret the facts we find?



How to explain the world?

We can “borrow” from different theories and ways of thinking

- ❑ Empiricism
- ❑ Positivism vs. Rationalism
- ❑ Darwinism & Cultural Evolution
- ❑ Marxism
- ❑ Structuralism & Social Theory
- ❑ Postmodernism
- ❑ Orientalism & Postcolonialism
- ❑ Feminism & Masculinism
- ❑ Processualism / Post-Processualism
- ❑ New Materialism / New Materiality



Why is theory important?

- What do we know about the past / about other cultures?
 - How do we know this?
 - How do we make sense of this & interpret it?
 - Is “common sense” enough?
 - How do we interpret data (material culture, textual and visual evidence, archaeological and scientific data, ...)?
-
- Theory is “the set of rules we use to translate the facts into meaningful accounts” [narratives] (Johnson 1999: 7)

How do we know what we know?

- ❑ What is knowledge?
- ❑ What is a fact?
- ❑ How do we acquire knowledge?
- ❑ How do we make sense of it?
 - What is the basis of interpretation?



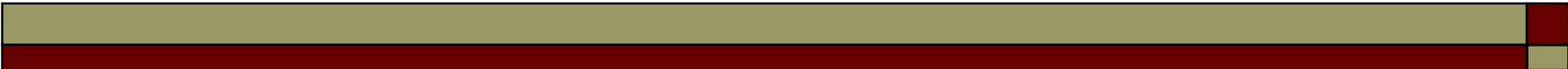
Facts

- What is a fact?
- Collecting facts:
 - How do we go about this?
 - How intuitive or straightforward is this?
 - Do we need to follow guidelines
- Ordering facts:
 - How do we organise our knowledge?
 - How do we present our knowledge?
 - How do we interpret facts?
 - = critical thinking



Interdisciplinarity...

- ❑ Why are we looking at theory together...?
 - ❑ Are all the approaches covered in this module aimed at you?
 - ❑ Are analytical approaches suitable for an historian appropriate for an archaeologist...
...or an anthropologist?
- multidisciplinary, comparative studies



Aims and Methods

□ What are the aims when studying AncCivs?



□ Where do the area studies fit in?

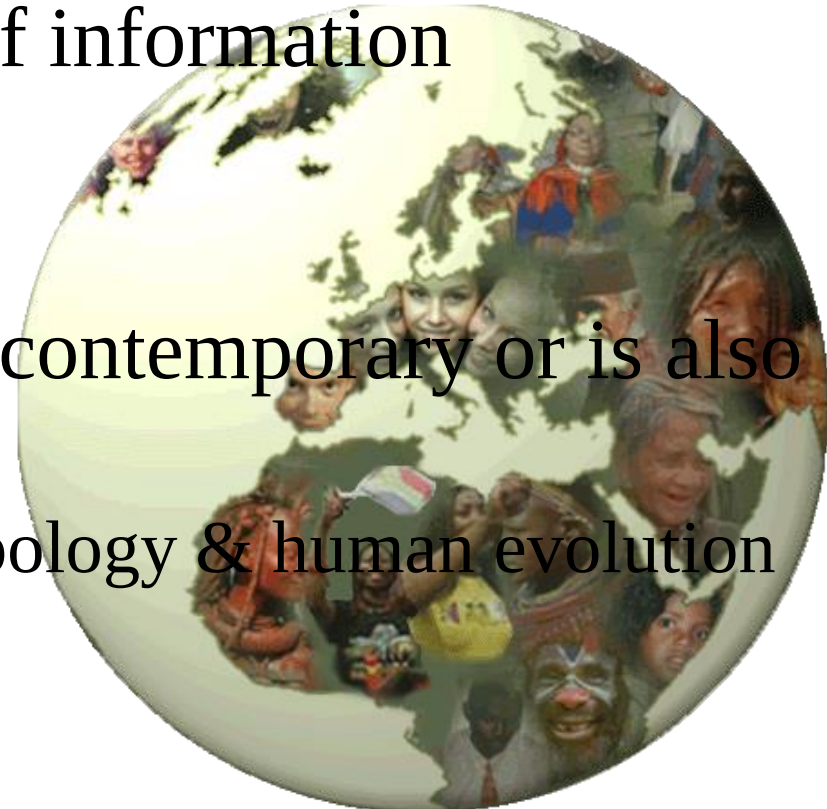
Archaeology

- What are the aims of archaeology?
 - To interpret past cultures from their material remains
 - Chronological limits of the discipline?
 - ???
- What is the core data / information source of archaeology?
 - Archaeological sites
 - Maps, aerial photos
 - Material culture
 - Ecofacts
 - ???



Anthropology

- ❑ What is anthropology?
 - The study of human culture & society
- ❑ What are the key sources of information
 - Ethnography
 - Material culture
- ❑ Is anthropology inevitably contemporary or is also a time-depth aspect?
 - What about cultural anthropology & human evolution



Sources

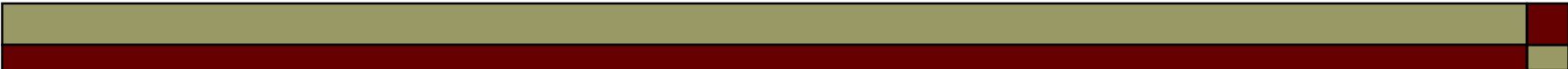
- ❑ Material Culture:
 - Archaeology (like anthropology) “is distinguished by its preoccupation with material culture” (Hodder 1982: 9)
- ❑ Creating narratives: the written word
- ❑ Reliability of the written word?
 - Exclusion?
 - Who writes history?
- ❑ When does written history begin?
- ❑ What about other sources in conjunction with the written word?



Area Studies (like Egyptology) offer:

- material culture and textual sources (complementing each other!)





What is a paradigm?

- Model to explain what is happening
 - What is studied
 - Which questions should be asked
 - How is research conducted
 - How should the investigation and findings be interpreted
- Can deliver a conceptional framework

3 main paradigms in dealing with past civilisations:

- ❑ Culture history
 - Emerged in 19th century, connected with the field of history
 - What? When? Where?
 - Based on material record (including written records)
 - Finding specifics and classifying groups of artefacts → grouping into distinctive cultures
- ❑ No explanation, how/why these artefacts came into existence

3 main paradigms in dealing with past civilisations

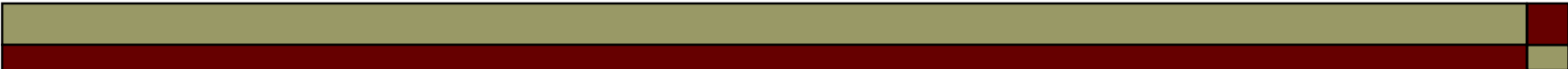
- ❑ Culture history
- ❑ Processualism
 - Developed in 1950ies
 - Archaeology as the study of a cultural process, which is cultural evolution as environmental adaptation
 - Reconstruct the life and circumstance of people who created artefacts (even past the archaeological record)
 - Attempt to construct an OBJECTIVE past

3 main paradigms in dealing with past civilisations

- ❑ Culture history
- ❑ Processualism
- ❑ Post-processualism
 - Developed by British archaeologists (Hodder)
 - Sees processualism too environmental, critique supposed objectivity by forgetting individual human features (as gender, ethnicity, identity)
 - Scientific approach to archaeology flawed due to our relying on our own modern cultural biases
 - Past is what we create it to be

Where does Egyptology stand?

- *Egyptology is a historical discipline devoted to the study of ancient Egypt. (Brewer, p. 1)*
- Relies on written records to supply chronology, historical data, and information
- As historical discipline = particularizing: what happened at a specific place at a specific time
- → is this still all????



Sub-disciplines

- ❑ Archaeology
- ❑ Anthropology
- ❑ History
- ❑ Art History
- ❑ Philology / Linguistic
- ❑ Religious Studies / Theology
- ❑ Museum Studies
- ❑ Heritage Studies
- ❑ Education

Post-processualism would say

- → Ancient Egypt should not be analysed on basis of material remains and techniques to make them, but a detailed description of complex social/ideological contexts

Merging with archaeology and anthropology

- ❑ **Egyptology as anthropological archaeology:**
- ❑ Why do we see this idea/event/happening emerging?
- ❑ Is this different to other ancient /modern societies?
- ❑ Try to answer this on the basis of texts and material culture (studies of sites, monumental architecture, settlement archaeology, art historical views with anthropological explanations, ...)

- Amun protects king
- Artistic representation:
- King – male (as the role of kingship dictates)
- BUT: inscriptions s3.t + nsw.yt
- = female endings
- Hatshepsut



Egyptology and its archaeological questions:

- ❑ Explanations of artefacts based on theoretical rules (as rules of authority)
- ❑ → different explanations, using the same object
- ❑ Must deliver an accurate (as best as possible) description with identification, and cataloguing of finds) → leads to assumptions, should be attempted to explain and prove
- ❑ Done via a viable hypothesis (model: presenting phenomena in a logical/objective way)
- ❑ MODEL NEEDS TO BE EVALUATED on the basis of accessible data