

INTERVIEW

Jonas Žakaitis talks with Christopher Witmore

JONAS ŽAKAITIS

Do you think that smell is a possible subject for archaeology?

CHRISTOPHER WITMORE

Yes. As far as I am concerned, all the senses are open to archaeological scrutiny; it all depends on the angle of your approach.

Sensation is part of richness of human experience at all times, in all places. However, the sensible exists as a relation between the observer and object observed. This relation is modified depending on whether someone is riding a horse, marching in phalanx formation, or navigating with a compass. The ratios of my senses shift with the use of maps or cell phones. Such technologies act as sensory prostheses. With them particular senses are amplified, while others are numbed and relegated to the background. Indeed, our modes of documentation and thus thought routinely sieve away smell, taste, touch, and often sound.

In any event, the five senses (though, when cleaved from the other four, vision takes on a different temporality within modern thought and through media) are ephemeral, transient, evanescent. So, if you are interested in the question of how particular unguents or incenses smelled to Greek perfumers from 3rd-century BCE Euboea

or to members of the Roman Curia then you have set for yourself an impossible task archaeologically. Theophrastus, for example, wrote an essay concerning odors by that very name, *De Odoribus*, but the use of historical accounts succumbs to the same problem of perpetual change.

Relations further refine; relations further define smell. One can never know whether the smell of thyme, the scent of mint or the fragrance of larkspur were the same for Athenaeus, the author of *The Learned Banqueters* (the text from which we gain many ancient culinary recipes), as they are for you or me. Does not the stench of excrement or the odor of death resonate differently for a plumber or a butcher? Or for a resident of a 9000 year-old Neolithic village who neither had the benefit of cesspits nor the distance of factory killing?

No two people live in precisely the same olfactory world. For some the scent of sweat is reminiscent of vanilla, for others it reeks of urine. Indeed, contemporary research into chemoreception has made the ways people perceive odors differently far more explicit. The human sense of smell varies with age (we lose sensory cells as we grow old), community/environs (living with animals or on a farm) and genetic make-up (genetic variability is

often claimed to translate into behavioral inconsistencies).

This is not to say that we lack common points of reference. A pear will give me my smell by giving me its smell. It is here that we return to the point concerning the angle of your approach. As an archaeologist, I take the wrong path by moving backwards into what is perceived by a 'knowing subject'. One should go forward into the world and in so doing I choose to avoid beginning with an assumption of a bifurcation between what is supplied by the mind and what is supplied by nature, what the British Empiricists referred to as secondary and primary qualities. Our sensory relations are part of the world we seek to better understand.

So long as we have things, we may struggle to engage something of the manner or style of past olfactory engagements; engagements that are nonetheless still with us when we make floral wreaths from larkspur or season our olive oil with thyme. This too is not so straightforward. There are around 300 varieties of larkspur. Which species of *Delphinium* did Athenaeus prefer in the making of garlands? Likewise, with thyme—of which type of *erpuillos* grown on Mount Hymettus do we speak? Is the larkspur wet after a fresh rain? Has the thyme been dried for over a year? These are the kinds of questions one must ask if we are to understand the possible recurrence of particular smells. And good archaeology strives to do this.

As we speak, organic chemistry is helping to recreate perfumes from the residues found on objects from Pompeii to Cyprus. By mixing the right combination of ingredients—sesame oil, cinnamon, jasmine—in the right portions, one may craft ancient perfumes, which were so important within Greco-Roman society.

Of course, there remains a question of why such details should matter?

JZ

That I don't know! But I guess this idea of the archaeology of smell levitated into my head when I was reading your texts and trying to find an adequate figure for the whole ontological complexity of an archaeological object: something that exists undecided between nature and human perception, something that makes sense only within a certain set of relations, but doesn't coincide with the latter, something that undulates both in the present and in the past. Maybe even something that exceeds the relationship of signification and meaning altogether? These are all the conundrums you are trying to think about under the banner of 'Symmetrical Archaeology', right?

CW

Yes, and to build upon your point, the smell of larkspur can never be encapsulated by anything else; that is, it will exceed any attempt to translate it into anything else. Through their smell, thyme, mint, jasmine, cinnamon, these things present themselves in ways that may be, yes, significant or meaningful, but there will also be emotive and more visceral responses—a tightening of the stomach, a warm feeling of well-being or even, depending on the circumstances, nausea. This richness is irreducible to those purified realms of speech, writing or vision, which are odorless and tasteless. Nonetheless, a hierarchy of value whereby writing and speech are privileged over things with their bewildering array of heterogeneous, variegated, ambiguous and ineffable qualities has been, and still is, to a large degree, pervasive.

For such reasons, the question of translation is key. What kinds of pasts do we manifest? You cannot smell with your eyes,

yet it is to the visual realm that we consign so much of what we do with the past, at least, in terms of documentation. By sieving away other senses we numb ourselves to them and in this way smell, sound, taste, and touch are largely regarded as mere background noise. To me, an archaeologist one must contend with things, their qualities, competencies, actions, integrity, or lack thereof, and, importantly, their differences. As such, walking the land, excavating the remains of an abandoned structure, photographing a street, holding a Neolithic figurine, or striving to manifest the material world in ways that cannot be conveyed by the flatlands of conventional publication are important in their own right as kinetic experiences with what remains of the past.

Now the notion or principle of symmetry is meant to remind us not to decide in advance what role various entities play in a given situation by imposing arbitrary hierarchies of value or preformed dogmas concerning the nature of the real. Symmetrical archaeology is agnostic. I don't mean this in the smug sense of the skeptical critic who remains aloof from the seemingly wayward beliefs of others. No, I take this in a very analytical sense, in that symmetrical archaeology refuses to delimit a given situation by imposing any predetermined schemes. Rather it strives to allow entities to define, to frame, themselves. Symmetrical archaeology grants dignity to all participants in a given situation and it does so by placing them on the same footing at the start. Why?

Consider, for example, a classic issue of archaeological concern related to the rise of the Greek *polis*, the city-state, and the development of Greek democracy. Were one to delve into this vast literature, one would find that the majority of the stories told about the formation of the Greek

polis rests upon some general assumptions about the conditions that make the *polis*, and therefore democracy, possible: succinctly, thought is often taken to precede action and ideology is regarded as a primary driver. Much of this work is overly reductive in that it attempts to find a more parsimonious explanation and, in so doing, it neglects those minions of humble entities, which worked behind the scenes.

If one digs deeper, one will find that it is the interactions between mundane architectures, open spaces of assembly, monuments, farmers strengthened as citizens, laws, writing (writing pools otherwise fleeting events and provides them with a spatial presence for all to potentially behold), hoplite warfare, psycho-political commitments, trade, allotment machines, water-clocks, agricultural fields, olive groves, roads, walls, harbors, merchant ships, the gods, and so on that makes democracy, and specifically Athenian democracy, possible. Attempts to cut through this complexity often impose schemes based upon that hegemonic and discordant drama between humans and the world.

In passing, it is worthwhile for one to acknowledge the full connotations of the Greek root *demos* found in democracy, which is conventionally translated as 'rule' (*kratos*) of the 'people' (*demos*). The term *demos* also connotes 'district, land or country', 'the place where people live', or the 'commons or commonalty'. Such polyvalence leaves plenty of room for nonhumans in the Greek notion of *demokratia*.

To be symmetrical is exhausting. It is much easier to slash through a given situation and impose what I think is going on. But in so doing, where does my fidelity lie? Not to those entities present in that situation, but to ties between groups of scholars, politics, ideological dogma, or my own publicity,

perhaps. These ideas are reminiscent of those once sacrosanct notions of objectivity and empiricism, but there are important differences, many of which, we have already touched upon. Indeed, it would be entirely asymmetrical to deny any mediating role to, for example, communities of scholars, academic advancement, peer review, and the necessity of self-perpetuation, but for these to be the primary obligations for one's work leads us astray from that which we seek to know best.

JZ

But what happens with the past then? If archaeology as a discipline is not leashed to history (or at least to history understood as a sequence of ideas, texts and social structures) and if an archaeological object might be not humanoid at all, then it's hard to stick to the departments of the past, present and future, isn't it? A Roman brick encountered in a field is not, strictly speaking, an object of the past at all.

CW

To situate the past in terms of the ways it actually exists is not to do away with it. Quite the contrary, I would suggest that to forefront the ontological grounds for the past is to better care for it.

It is, of course, routine to consider the past to be detached, demarcated, and distinct. It is common to regard the past in an historical sense as that which was lived. The past, however, is not always past. And the past involves more than 'living' beings solely. Whereas history might hold: no past, no brick. Archaeology is quite warranted in affirming: no brick, no past! Indeed, problems for archaeology have always followed upon a false assumption that the past exists apart from the conditions of its own production. The past, to be sure, is ongoing in its formation.

Let's consider your example of the Roman brick further. I will take certain liberties and place this brick with the remnants of a circular structure outside of Rome along the Via Appia Antica between the second and third milestone. Convention refers to this ruined structure as the 'Mausoleum of Romulus', which was probably a tomb built to commemorate the son of the Emperor Maxentius (306-12 CE) and, while it may have once sheltered the body of Romulus, it was perhaps constructed with an aim to house the imperial dynasty of Maxentius. It is of interest that the former porch of this erstwhile tomb, which is surmounted by a once derelict nineteenth century farmhouse, recently underwent restoration to become the *restauro del Mausoleo di Romolo*.

Now, if I claim to have encountered the tomb or Mausoleum of Romulus as I was walking along the Via Appia last summer, what assumptions do I make concerning the reality of this building? Is this Roman tomb indifferent to subsequent events? Does it persist as a tomb despite later transformations into quarry, farmhouse, Italian heritage or restaurant? If we say yes, then we accord the past primacy. This old dominance rested on a mode of existence where the Mausoleum was a kind of substance that sustained itself and existed apart from its relations. By remaining indifferent and detached from any concurrent transactions the material past as tomb acquired a certain kind of determinative specificity that rendered subsequent events as derivative. But to presume objects to endure in this way is to situate them in a hermetically sealed vacuum of sorts.

Contrastingly, when we speak of the so-called 'Mausoleum of Romulus' we also speak of the *Parco dell' Appia Antica*, the Department of Cultural Affairs, architects and architectural historians, bricks,

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masons, mortar, guidebooks, ancient authors, restaurateurs and investors, as well as long chains of interactions that give rise to this structure in a field surrounded by a brick enclosure and a chain-link fence. As a thing, this heritage site and restaurant gathers these relations together; it is not indifferent to them. And it is the relations between these myriad entities and organizations that help to define it as such.

Now let's return to our brick which I associated with this structure. When one encounters it in the adjacent field, whether it was produced 2 months or 2000 years ago, it can still be used to prop open a door or as a structural component of a wall or as a missile to hurl through a window. But to say that the brick is 'of the past' from the start is to frame it in a very particular way; this is to situate it in a very distinct field of relations, which it also helps to define. We could equally envisage another mode of existence where the brick can be said to become something new when it enters into alliances with doors, mortar and other bricks or wayward adolescents and soon-to-be-shattered windows.

When antiquarians, archaeologists or historians happen upon our brick in a field they do not encounter a sequence of ideas, texts or social structures, and the moment they look elsewhere for an explanation concerning the reasons for this brick they take flight from how the brick in its current milieu actually presents itself. This is of course what archaeologists do—we complicate the story of the brick by linking it with inscriptions, architectural features, or other scholarly achievements, but we cannot say that this past, which we play a role in co-producing, is the ontological starting point for our labor when we come upon a brick-in-a-field. Of course, it is not just any brick in any field, but the point is that it is quite different to deal with a

brick-with-a-label in a storage room or a brick-sorted-into-a-pile with other 'Roman' bricks that are closed off behind a fence which delimits an imperial monument dating to the early fourth-century CE. Framed as 'of the past' this brick is the outcome of our practices, it is an achievement, and it takes on-going work to maintain it as such.

Ultimately, and to reiterate a point that I made at an earlier stage in our conversation, the brick can neither be reduced to the conditions of its production, nor can this brick be exhausted by its relations with imperial families, archaeologists or with mortar. The key in terms of your observation that the archaeological object may not be humanoid is that the labor that goes into forming, articulating and maintaining the past belongs as much to the brick as it does to any other interlocutor. I stress this point, because we archaeological practitioners do not operate with a separate rulebook from the material world. For me, at least, the interactions between a brick and mortar are just as important as the interactions between a brick and mason's hands. Now, this is a strength of archaeology, which etymologically speaking is the study of *ta archaia*, 'old things'. But, with respect to our concerns here, there is a slippage between things as *ta archaia* and things as *ta pragmata*. The latter designates a 'deed', an 'act', an 'affair', a 'circumstance', a 'contested matter', an 'obligation', a 'thing'. Thus, the Greek term *pragmata* better covers the bewildering diversity of things, while *archaia* provides a kind of orientation, one of many possible angles on our brick.

Returning to your point regarding departments of the past, one could even argue that they have never been more necessary given the fact that through the labors of archaeology, history and the heritage industry the past is in many ways proliferating all

around us. Every year more pasts are gathered into the present. And, yes, every year more are consigned to Lethe, the river of forgetfulness. Time percolates in this way. One year a brick, which once formed a component of a former tomb, is encased in soil, the next it is scrutinized, sorted and stacked in a pile with other Roman bricks associated with the so-called 'Mausoleum of Romulus'.

I have passed over many particulars in haste, but what you underline in your question is not so much an issue of doing away with the past. Rather, you have touched upon a broad shift from a past as successive, from a past as a series of replacements, to a past as simultaneous, to a past as co-extensive with the practices that produce it. The issue, at least for me, is to recognize how pasts are caught up in an imminent struggle, which is about the power of making deep connections in ongoing processes of self-creation, and in this we should not pretend to separate *what* we know from *how* we know.

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