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Emplotment as Epic in Archaeological Writing: The Site Monograph as Narrative

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Over a long career, Hayden White (e.g., 1973, 1987, 1999) sought to understand the 'fictions' of historical narratives – that is, aspects of historical writing that are imposed on past events by the form of historians' narrative discourse. In *Metahistory* (1973), his magnum opus, he was particularly interested in a set of four tropes that provide alternative ways of imbuing past events with meaning (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony) and in the generic story structures or *modes of emplotment* that often correspond to those (romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire). White's critique of historical narrative, although by no means generally accepted among historians, continues to be a touchstone for debate about the discipline and its discursive product (Ankersmit, Domanska, and Kellner 2009, Herman 2011, Doran 2013, Wilson 2014).

The continued relevance of White's work to debates about historical writing makes it a convenient point of departure for thinking about the corresponding 'fictions' of archaeological narrative. The most immediate problem that such a plan encounters is that White's work has had relatively little impact in archaeology, even in the expanding critical literature on archaeological narrative. Analyses of archaeological storytelling, in other words, have not found White's four modes of emplotment particularly useful. One might conclude that White was wrong, or that his framework simply doesn't apply to archaeology. A more interesting question to ask is whether archaeological narratives are somehow different from their historical counterparts.

This paper argues that White's framework is a helpful point of reference for thinking about the nature of archaeological narrative and the disciplinary identity of archaeology. It proves useful to identify a fifth mode of emplotment beyond the Whitean four. At the most general

level, archaeological writings are emplotted as *epic* rather than as romance, tragedy, comedy, or satire. Considering archaeology to be emplotted as epic leads to an understanding of archaeological narratives as multilayered, multi-authored, and not necessarily confined to a single text.

Archaeological Writings Contrasted with Those of Historians

Archaeology and history share the general goal of telling (true) stories of the human past and making sense of (explaining, interpreting) those stories. I consider archaeological writing to be fundamentally narrative in its basic orientation, a claim that is debatable but which seems readily defendable. The fundamental importance of cultural history, for example, is recognized across a wide spectrum of theoretical perspectives (e.g., Tilley 1996, Morris 2000, Pauketat 2001, Shennan 2002). Following Pluciennik (1999, p. 654) and Rudebeck (2000, pp. 13-14), I define a *narrative* as referring to a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Narratives thus recount an ordered series of events and reach closure. The structure of beginning, middle, and end is provided by *plot*, which can be understood as the logic that connects the diverse elements of a story (Ricoeur 1984, pp. 40-41, 64-68). (Broader definitions of narrative [e.g., Joyce 2002, pp. 12-14] are not useful here because they distract attention from plot and emplotment, my central concerns in this paper.)

Archaeological and historical writings can be distinguished in a variety of ways. Two conventional points of contrast are relevant to this paper. First, historians start out with texts and write more texts, whereas archaeologists start out with material objects and write texts. Of particular interest here is that the material entities that form the basis of archaeological narratives are dramatically diverse in nature: pottery, stone, pollen, landscapes, and so forth. Associated

with those are specialized literatures, each with its own interpretive conventions and characteristic narrative themes.

A second, equally conventional, observation concerns different emphases among the book-length works published by archaeologists and historians. Among historical monographs, we can roughly distinguish between:

1) works that present primary archival evidence (e.g., *The Papers of George Washington, Revolutionary War Series, Vol. 1*, Abbot et al. 1985),
2) works that analyze and interpret some particular body of primary texts (e.g., *The Cheese and the Worms,* Ginzburg 1980), and
3) secondary works that synthesize multiple works from the other levels (e.g., *Citizens: A Chronicle of the French Revolution*, Schama 1989).

Although a great many histories fit into the third category, book length works of category (2) are foundational to the field as an empirical discipline. Works in category (2) are often overtly narrative in structure, and they regularly provide fascinating reading for nonspecialists – for instance, *Ambivalent Conquests: Maya and Spaniard in Yucatan, 1517-1570* (Clendinnen 1987) or *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Davis 1983). In many ways, then, historical narrative can be regarded as residing in book-length works, often overtly narrative in structure, that are the result of direct engagement with primary archival evidence. White's (1973) analyses of historical narrative focus on categories 2 and 3. In my opinion, the proliferating possibilities for narrative, authorship, dynamism, and so forth made possible by new digital technologies (see Rigney 2010 on history, Joyce 2002 on archaeology) do not fundamentally alter the *relations* between these categories.

In archaeology, book length works of category (2) have a lower profile than they do in history. In my own field of Mesoamerican archaeology, many originate as dissertations. There is sometimes pressure from publishers to present them as if they were category (3) works – for instance, *The Beginnings of Mesoamerican Civilization* (Rosenswig 2010), which is actually a category (2) interpretation of materials from a single site.

In archaeology, it is really category (1) works that have the foundational role corresponding to that of category (2) works in history. The weighty obligation of the site monograph hangs over us in a more exaggerated way than anything similar does for historians. The reason is of course the destructive nature of archaeological data collection. The crucial contextual information survives only in our excavation records; historians have the luxury of turning the page of an archival document without destroying it. The fact that it has become difficult to find a publisher for site monographs in no way diminishes their fundamental importance to the discipline. Publication will surely recover in digital form – enhanced and reimagined but not fundamentally altered in function.

In contrast to the foundational works of history (category 2), those that establish archaeology as an empirical discipline (category 1) are less overtly narrative in character. They are usually organized by differences in material type (stone, ceramic, etc.) rather than chronology. It is in secondary syntheses of category (3) that archaeological writing is most obviously narrative in character – *Zapotec Civilization* (Marcus and Flannery 1996), for instance, or *The Domestication of Europe* (Hodder 1990). As a result, in contrast to history, archaeological works that most clearly have a salient plot are further removed from the primary data. However, the intensity of interpretive effort that goes into site monographs should serve as a warning that archaeological works of category (1) may be more deeply imbued with narrative than corresponding historical

works, even granting that the latter are editorially narrativized, for instance by the selection and arrangement of letters. A curated collection of artifacts is 'edited,' but site monographs are really 'authored.' As Specter (1993, pp. 30-33) has shown, category (1) archaeological works may be plotted in ways not evident at first glance. After developing the concept of emplotment as epic, I will return to the narrative character of archaeological works in category (1).

Emplotment

Narratives are said to be *emplotted* when the intent is to emphasize the activity of the author in giving meaning to a disparate set of events. White (1973) applied the term not to what would typically be called plot – the logical linkages among elements within a story – but to a level of meaning given to those elements by the story itself. Every narrative gradually reveals itself to be a story of a particular kind (White 1973, p. 7). The events it relates are therefore given meaning by association with a larger category of stories. These modes of emplotment, are relatively few in number. White (1973) identified just four, and he related them to other ways in which meaning is created in historical narratives. In each case, there were four possibilities, so the dimensions of meaning-making in history could be presented in tabular form (White 1973, p. 29). Of the various ways in which meaning emerges in historical writings, White's (1973, 1987, 1999) focus was on the four basic tropes: synecdoche, metaphor, metonymy, and irony. He saw those as linked by strong relations of affinity to the four modes of emplotment. In *Metahistory* (1973), White drew on Northrop Frye (1957) to identify comedy, romance, tragedy, and satire as basic modes of emplotment in historical writings. In that early work, he did briefly note that there might be other modes of emplotment 'such as Epic' (White 1973, p. 7), but he did not pursue emplotment as epic there or in subsequent publications. Certainly, extraneous modes of

emplotment would not have fit with the four-fold scheme developed in *Metahistory*. There were only four tropes, so Frye's (1957) prior identification of just four generic plots suited White's framework.

In subsequent work, White's central interest continued to be the four tropes. He was ambivalent, perhaps even inconsistent, about the necessity of just four primary modes of emplotment. On the one hand, he characterized the four tropes as 'basic' and associated each of them with a 'corresponding' plot; on the other hand, he granted that historians choose 'among the *many* kinds of plot structure provided by [their] cultural tradition[s]' (White 1999, pp. 9, 11; emphasis added). His expanded list of possible plot structures (always qualified by 'and so forth' or the like) changed somewhat from one article to another (e.g., White 1999, pp. 18, 29).

My focus here is on emplotment, understood as including a level of meaning given to events by the story itself. If one accepts that as a significant level of meaning in historical narratives, then, given the general unity of purpose of historical and archaeological narratives, one would expect a similar level of meaning in archaeological works as well. I reject the idea that the four modes of emplotment identified by White form a necessary or in any way special set. Further, any relations of affinity of those story structures with overarching tropes (or with modes of argument or ideology) I also take with a grain of salt. It is worth noting that White's original four plots lack integrity as a set. Comedy, romance, and tragedy are defined with reference to generic storylines. Satire, in contrast, is defined by the operation of inversion it performs. A satirical plot may invert a comic, romantic, or tragic storyline; as a mode of emplotment, it requires the prior existence of at least one of the other plots. I propose *epic* as a mode of emplotment at a level similar to those identified by White, but I will not try to establish any corresponding trope, mode

of argument, or ideology for epic. Those correspondences, in my view, were an elegant but ultimately artificial feature of White's (1973) original framework.

The Analysis of Archaeological Narratives

In critical analyses of archaeological narratives, the work of Hayden White is generally a passing point of reference rather than a significant focus (e.g., Last 1995, pp. 145-148, Solli 1996, pp. 209-210, Pluciennik 1999, pp. 656-661, Joyce 2002, p. 36). An important exception is the work of Rudebeck (1996, 2000), discussed below. Hodder's (1993, 1995) creative use of White's categories to elucidate the rhetoric in material culture has not to my knowledge been pursued by others or by Hodder himself. Critical scrutiny of the nature, composition, and components of archaeological texts has of course long been an important theme in interpretive archaeology (Shanks and Tilley 1987, pp. 12-24, 207-208, Shanks 1990, Tilley 1990, Sinclair 1989, Hodder 1992, 1999, pp. 52-56, Nicklasson 1996, Leibhammer 2000, Joyce 2002, pp. 32-34, 133-138). There is some work, inspired by historical and literary theories, on the structure of archaeological narratives, including specific attention to emplotment (Terrell 1990, Landau 1991, Rudebeck 1995, 1996, 2000, Pluciennick 1999, Ballard 2003). Philosophers of archaeology have addressed such issues as the nature of bridging arguments, the status of evidence in relation to theory, the empirical adequacy of interpretive statements, and strategies for promoting the ability of data to constrain theories (Kosso 2001, Wylie 2002, 2008), but they have given less attention to archaeological writing in general or narrative in particular.

I think it is fair to say that the main focus in archaeological reflections on narrative is metanarrative, master narrative, or ideology: how pre-existing themes, stories, and vantage points are imposed on the evidence or how archaeological remains are used to create

contemporary meanings (Schrire 1980, Meskell 1995, Silberman 1995, Jones and Graves-Brown 1996, Abu El-Haj 2001, Joyce with Preucel 2002, Bernbeck 2005, Lull et al. 2011, Sterling 2011, Wurst and Novinge 2011). An important goal of such work is to expose and undermine the ideological underpinnings of archaeological narratives by questioning the authority of the archaeologist, fostering contributions from multiple voices, and promoting dialogues that include voices from outside the discipline (e.g., Solli 1996, Pluciennick 1999, R. Joyce with Guyer and M. Joyce 2002, Hodder 2003, Atalay 2008, Johnson 2008). These aspects of archaeological narratives deserve the attention they have received. However, instead of diving into that literature here, I am proposing to pursue a different path. I will return to the ideological critique of archaeological narratives only at the end, when I identify it as work that targets a particular level of emplotment.

Of most immediate relevance to consideration of emplotment in archaeology are studies that examine the structure of archaeological narratives. There we find that the authors, though inspired to different degrees by White, end up framing their analysis of narrative at a more specific level, where concepts of particular relevance to the set of texts under examination (for example, core/periphery, culture contact, Western colonization) seem more salient than generic concepts such as romance or tragedy. Terrell (1999, p. 671) points towards characteristically archaeological and anthropological tropes – 'discovery,' 'encounter' – which are again more specific than those White borrows from neoclassical rhetoric. The most thorough archaeological application of White's (1973) framework is Rudebeck's (2000) an analysis of narratives of the transition to agriculture (see also Rudebeck 1996). At the level of analysis at which (in my opinion) White conceived his four modes of emplotment, Rudebeck (2000, p. 280) perceives a decades-long trajectory in accounts of agricultural origins from romance, to comedy, to tragedy,

to at least a degree of satire in which, ultimately, the topic itself (‘origins’of agriculture) is undermined. However, the more recent the work, the more difficult it is to classify according to White's typology, and in most works elements of multiple modes of emplotment are identifiable (Rudebeck 2000, p. 279; also, pp. 204-206, 227, 243). Further, most of Rudebeck's narrative analysis centers on themes and plot elements that, however general in scope, are more specifically relevant to the story of agricultural origins than comedy, tragedy, and so forth. For example, those themes include social relations, demography, and resources, but also human intentionality, nature-versus-culture, stability-versus-change as natural conditions, and even Biblical metaphors (the Garden of Eden, the Fall).

In sum, then, while White (1973) analyzed narrative broadly, seeking the dominant mode of emplotment that oriented an entire work, archaeologists who have critically examined narratives in their field choose more specific scales of analysis. At those scales, more specific concepts and themes are prominent and themes from multiple modes of emplotment are identifiable. In assessments of archaeological works as wholes – of the meaning of the story itself – White's four modes of emplotment haven't seemed particularly helpful.

In light of the idea that archaeological narratives commonly incorporate multiple modes of emplotment, Aristotle's discussion of epic in the *Poetics* is of interest. Epics, according to Aristotle, are longer than tragedies. They also include *multiple* plots (*Poetics* 18:4-5 and 24:3-4).

Epic as a Mode of Emplotment

I have suggested that White did not pursue epic as a mode of emplotment at least partly because it did not fit into the elegant four-fold scheme he was developing. Another reason may have been that he did not see how epic could be envisioned as a mode of emplotment at the level

of his analysis. His suggestion was that epic might be understood as the plot structure of *chronicle*, an arrangement of events in temporal order. Chronicle was one of the ‘primitive elements’ of historical accounts; it was not narrative because it lacked closure (White 1973, pp. 5-8). Understood as the plot structure of chronicle, epic would not be relevant to emplotment in narrative histories of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I will suggest that Griffiths and Rabinowitz (2011), in an analysis of epic and the Russian novel, have hit upon a more satisfying understanding of emplotment as epic – in Whitean terms – than did White himself. This section works its way gradually toward their proposal.

One of the notable characteristics of epic is that has been so often declared dead. Bahktin's (1981, p. 14) assessment of it as ‘already completely finished, a congealed and half-moribund genre’ is but a recent example of a tradition of such pronouncements that stretches back to Aristotle (Griffiths and Rabinowitz 2011, p. 22). Epic persists, yet it does so through constant mutation (Kelly 1994, p. 2).

As a result of this mutability, it is hard to define epic based on its *formal features* (Martin 2005, pp. 10-11). Epics have been considered to be poems of significant length, in an elevated language, favoring lengthy similes, and derived from or persisting as oral literature. While these are useful features for the consideration of epic specifically in the ancient Classical world (Foley 2005, Jensen 2005), the movement of epic in the Western tradition from song to poetry to prose to film confounds any general understanding based on formal criteria beyond a general expectation of considerable length (Griffiths and Rabinowitz 2011, p. 19).

Epic has often been identified in terms of its *content* (Kelly 1994, pp. 17-18, Martin 2005, p. 10). It concerns heroes and gods, wars and quests. It is conceived at vast scales of space and time, set in a distant past, and has a serious purpose beyond that of any individual's perspective

or interest. Again, it proves difficult to characterize the broad sweep of epic tradition as a whole based on attributes of content. Kelly (1994, pp. 11-14) notes that one important aspect of content, present in the *Odyssey*, but growing in importance from Milton to the present, is the *encyclopedic scope* of epic. He observes that Victor Hugo, in *La légende des siècles*, sought to depict humanity in all its aspects, with disparate characters united under the theme of progress (see the 1857 preface [Hugo 1967, pp. 59-62] for Hugo's own statement of intent and scope).

Encyclopedism sets a high bar of personal attainment for the aspiring epic poet. Jean Desmarets de Saint-Sorlin, writing in the 17th century, insisted that epic authors should know architecture, painting, sculpture, music, and other arts (Kelly 1994, p. 12). One hundred forty years later, Coleridge, in a half serious, half mocking vein, expands the required competence to 'universal science.' Contemplating the training he would undertake before writing epic he says, 'I would be a tolerable mathematician. I would thoroughly know Mechanics, Hydrostatics, Optics, and Astronomy, Botany, Metallurgy, Fossilism, Chemistry, Geology, Anatomy, Medicine…' (Letter quoted in O'Neill 2010, p. 194).

Epic has also been understood in relation to its *function*. Various attributes of form and content – the elevated language, serious purpose, great length, vast scope, and heroic subject matter set in the past – are understandable in relation to epic's recurring function as a charter for group identity (Foley 2005, p. 210). The theme of epic as national charter or declaration of identity can be traced through Virgil, Dante, Spenser, Melville, Tolstoy, and Joyce. Griffiths and Rabinowitz (2011, p. 20) point out that the tradition has often been renewed from its peripheries. A recent example is the West Indian epic poem *Omeros*, by Derek Walcott (1990), who received the Nobel Prize in literature in 1992 (see Hamner 2010 for commentary).

Finally, epic has been considered a *genre*. However, two senses in which it is larger than a genre point the way to identification of the epic mode of emplotment. First, epic's mutability of form allows it to transcend other genres; in some ways, it is more a tradition, a super-genre, or a mode within other genres rather than itself a genre (Martin 2005, pp. 9-11, Griffiths and Rabinowitz 2011, p. 19). In this sense, epic seems structurally similar to White's four modes of emplotment, which Frye (1957, p. 162) described as generic plots or 'pregeneric elements.' Second, while all genres serve as 'horizons of expectation' for readers and a source of norms in relation to which authors compose new texts (Todorov 1990, p. 17), self-conscious reference to prior texts is developed to an exaggerated degree in epic. Dante makes Virgil a character in his story – and leaves him behind in Purgatory. The central character in *Omeros* is named Helen, as is Pierre's first wife (Helene) in *War and Peace*. Indeed, Griffiths and Rabinowitz (2011: Chapter 4) identify a host of references to both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in *War and Peace*. In an extended and convincing passage, they argue that the two main characters, Andrei and Pierre, reference, respectively, Achilles and Odysseus (pp. 152-163).

Expanding on such observations, Griffiths and Rabinowitz (2011, pp. 15-25) identify a 'double plot' in epic. There is always the story of heroes and their deeds – plot in the normal sense of the term. There is also, however, a second-level plot that concerns the story as a whole and its relation to the epic tradition: will Virgil succeed or fail in his bid to rival Homer? Is Dante's audacity in leaving Virgil in Purgatory justified by the greatness of his own text? For epic, inclusion in the prior tradition is more important than specific elements of form or content. Indeed, in contrast to other genres, inclusion in the epic tradition is restricted to successful works; bad novels are still novels, but bad would-be epic is not epic (Griffiths and Rabinowitz 2011, p. 21).

The second plot of a would-be epic is its bid for inclusion in the larger epic tradition. Success in that endeavor establishes the literary legitimacy of the work, the greatness of the author. Yet epic in its vastness and seriousness is 'the ultimate metonymic art form;' on the plane of ideology, it is 'a metonymy for culture itself' (Martin 2005, p. 18). Epics therefore make good charters for group identity. Inclusion in the epic tradition legitimates not just the author and the work but the nation itself.

Griffiths and Rabinowitz's (2011) proposals concerning the double plot of epic make sense of a range of elements discussed by scholars of epic, including the mutability of form and content, the burden experienced by the author, and the recurring function as charter for group identity. Further, the second plot works at the level of Hayden White's concept of emplotment: it concerns the meaning of the story itself. To emplot a story as epic involves establishing it as a legitimate member of the epic tradition. Like satire, then, epic does not have a generic storyline; following Aristotle, it includes multiple plot strands, which may be romantic, tragic, and so forth. However, while satire is constituted with reference to other story structures (through the operation of inversion), epic is emplotted with reference to a tradition of specific works, by establishing legitimate membership.

Archaeology as Epic

Several features of the epic tradition resonate with archaeological writing and with archaeology as a practice. Obviously, various aspects of epic form and content are not present in archaeology. (Archaeologists do not write in dactylic hexameter, for instance.) Yet form and content are domains in which analysts find weak coherence within the epic tradition itself. Certainly, the stories that archaeology as a field has to tell are 'epic' in the sense of their vast

scope in time and/or space and their setting in the often distant past. They also meet the criterion of serious purpose, particularly in more overtly narrative works, often presented as contributions to the story of a people, a nation, or humanity as a whole. Thus, one of the common social functions of archaeology converges with that of epic: nationalist archaeology, as Trigger (1984) showed in a classic paper, provides charters for group identities (see also Kohl and Fawcett 1995, Graves-Brown et al. 1996, Kane 2003, Bernbeck and McGuire 2011).

The above features are most evident in synthetic or secondary works (category 3 in the scheme presented above). Turning to category (1), the site monograph and other similar presentations of primary data, we find two other features of epic: encyclopedism and great length. Ideally, such monographs should cover everything found, including all the analyses appropriate to each individual class of material recovered or field observation made. The high bar of personal attainment experienced by epic poets and half-jokingly summarized by Coleridge resonates with the range of competencies – intellectual, diplomatic, and practical – expected of archaeologists. Archaeologists should be able to judge the most productive place to dig, dialogue with descendent communities, design a database, recognize an intrusive feature, fix a pickup truck, cut a discreet deal with a restive landowner, map a site with a laser transit, discuss the latest book by Bruno Latour, rig up an outdoor shower, draw scientific illustrations of flint tools, describe strata using appropriate geological standards, take professional-quality photos of excavations and artifacts, and reliably supply a field crew with good food on a tight budget. So, not only does the final site monograph have features resembling epic, but the years of activities leading up to it and the demands experienced by the author – actually usually multiple authors, of which more in the next section – resonate with the demands on the would-be epic poet.

What about epic as super-genre and particularly the second-level plot in which a would-be epic makes a bid for inclusion in the epic tradition? Building on the encyclopedism of the site monograph and the associated personal demands on the archaeologist, it does seem possible to identify a second-level plot: the presentation of the work as good archaeology. The monograph is the crystallization, the index, the written proof of all the practical abilities and dedicated work required to pull off the archaeological project from beginning to end. It puts the archaeologist's knowledge, competence, commitment, and stamina on view for critical inspection. Admittedly, bad site monographs are still site monographs, but in archaeology there is the pressure not just to meet the standards of monographs by Evans, Kidder, Lumbreras, MacNeish, Mellaart, Petrie, Willey, etc. but to surpass them. Emplotment of the archaeological site monograph as good archaeology demands that it present itself as *better* than the traditional greats because the record is examined more completely (phytoliths, microstratigraphy), more thoroughly (body sherds, not just diagnostics), or with newly developed technical capacities (portable XRF). It is not surprising, then, that we continually critique our predecessors' monographs while too often putting off publication of our own.

There appears to be promise for the notion of archaeology emplotted as epic. However, there is an obvious objection. The site monograph is key, but such works are not overtly narrative in structure. Many seem closer to actual encyclopedias than to encyclopedic stories. I suggest in the next section that they are stories nonetheless; indeed, they are characteristically *archaeological* stories.

Characteristically Archaeological Narratives

Referring back to the three categories of book-length works in archaeology, the challenge is that the most overtly narrative are in category (3), at some remove from the primary data. In such works, it is not evident that we should distinguish 'archaeological narrative' from 'historical narrative' or that emplotments to be found therein would differ all that much from those in historical works.

On the other hand, category (1) works in archaeology are hardly pure facts. Their presentation of evidence is already imbued with narrative themes, as demonstrated, for instance, by Hodder (1992), Spector (1993), and Joyce (2002). The narrative strands in site monographs are diverse. The (contemporary) story of the fieldwork itself is usually only minimally referenced in traditional monographs. More pervasive, even if not evident at first glance, are stories with social content incorporated into descriptions of excavations or materials. Such stories may be implicit. Spector (1993, p. 30-33) draws attention to the way in which colonialist metanarratives lurk behind descriptions of artifacts from contact era sites in the Great Lakes region of North America. That case is surely not unique. There are also more explicit but nevertheless fragmented and diverse narratives distributed across the chapters on different classes of materials. Each of those chapters strives to make sense of a particular body of finds in relation to other works on that class of item. Thus, the faunal chapter references narrative elements from a larger faunal literature, the lithics chapter likewise from the lithics literature, and so forth.

What if we were to identify, as a characteristically archaeological narrative, the sum total of all such work from a particular research project? The ideal type would be the site monograph, characteristically uneven, diverse, and multi-authored. However, once we have gone that far, it would seem unnecessary to confine archaeological narratives to a single text. A 'narrative' might encompass all the diverse discursive output of collaborators working with a particular project

and its yield in materials, notes, and records. A set of writings such as that will ideally report everything recovered or observed in the course of the research and translate it into diachronic social terms. In other words, the writings will tell a (very complex) story. At one level, there will be multiple plot strands, though also (hopefully) synthetic efforts to bring those together. At another level, the whole set of writings together makes an implicit claim to be good archaeology. It asserts that the destruction done to the archaeological record has *not* been in vain, that the archaeologists were up to the serious task, and that they have followed through competently in myriad activities that extended over years. This claim is a meaning of the whole, a second-level plot.

An examination of actual cases supports this characterization of site monographs as complex, fragmented, and fundamentally archaeological narratives. As an example, consider *Prehistoric Archaeology along the Zagros Flanks* (Braidwood et al. 1983a), chosen because of its suggestively epic dimensions: at 695 pages, it measures nearly 7 cm cover to cover and weighs 3.4 kg. The volume includes a preface, an introduction, 22 chapters, and three appendices, each written by one or more of the 18 total authors. In the introduction, Braidwood et al. (1983b, p. 6-8) reflect on a preliminary report of 23 years earlier and other subsequent works, supporting the idea that if this text is to be considered a narrative, then it makes sense to include also those other works under different cover as part of the 'story' being told. As a site monograph, *Zagros Flanks* is pretty standard in conception and organization, generally fitting Hodder's (1992) portrait of late 20th century site monographs, in which the (contemporary) story of the fieldwork and the use of first-person pronouns are restricted to the preface and introduction. However, prompted perhaps by the lengthy interval (36 years) between the first field season and the final publication, the research story here is less about field discovery than a retrospective reflection on a quarter-

century of accumulating evidence on agricultural origins in Southwest Asia and on changing understandings of how Jarmo fit into that larger, ever developing narrative. This dimension of the story of the research is taken up in several of the chapters (and thus not confined to the introduction). It is also envisioned in 'epic' terms, as contributing to an archaeological problem greater than the life of any individual archaeologist. While joking that they 'feel fine,' Braidwood et al. (1983b, pp. 16-17) note that they do not expect the 'how' and 'why' of agricultural origins to be solved in their lifetimes. They suggest that questions of that kind are best addressed in synthetic works of what I am calling category (3) (e.g., Cohen 1977) and for that reason no single overarching story is presented in *Zagros Flanks*.

More to the point are the strands of narrative woven into individual chapters. Considered together, those strands recall the multiple plots of epic. At least three types of narrative strand are present. First are those that build directly from evidence reported in the monograph, as when a human story is supplied for an observed change in material culture. For instance, detailed comparison of the sequences of ceramic and stone vessels disproves simple preconceptions (that pottery would replace stone) and prompts instead an interesting scenario involving cultural continuity, technological adoption, and local reinvention (Adams 1983, pp. 221-223). Second are cases in which Jarmo finds are connected to narrative strands from a particular specialized literature. For instance, barley from Jarmo is linked to a story of change from brittle to tough rachis and thus to a larger botanical narrative of plant domestication (Watson 1983, p. 501). Finally, there are references to what could be thought of as disciplinary metanarratives . For instance, lack of residential differentiation in pottery assemblages is taken as evidence that 'social stratification was *still* weakly developed' (Adams 1983, p. 222, emphasis added). The word 'still' in that case is sufficient to call forth one of the big stories of prehistoric archaeology,

the progressive emergence of complexity and inequality. Thus, site monographs like *Prehistoric Archaeology along the Zagros Flanks* may appear to be more like encyclopedias than stories, but they are actually deeply interwoven with strands of narrative. Given that they are narrativized yet close to the data, that they constitute a fundamental obligation on those who do fieldwork, and that they are foundational of archaeology as a discipline, there seems some basis for considering them to be 'narratives' and, indeed, quintessentially *archaeological* narratives.

In this usage, archaeological narratives, typified by the site monograph, are multi-authored, multi-stranded, and not necessarily confined to a single text. Joyce (2002, pp. 52-55) recognizes such features in traditional archaeological narratives, but nevertheless finds those texts limited and monologic because they lack true dialogue among independent speakers. Is the traditional site monograph likely to be replaced by something altogether new? A brief look at two self-consciously innovative research/publication projects suggests not.

In *Stone Worlds: Narrative and Reflexivity in Landscape Archaeology*, Bender et al. (2007) report on a multidisciplinary archaeological project centered at the site of Lesternick in Southwest England. Although the artifacts recovered are not reported in full detail in the volume, there is extensive empirical discussion of individual houses and other features (involving the same basic types of narrative strand noted in *Zagros Flanks*). The big departure from the traditional monograph is the vastly expanded attention to the social processes of production of knowledge during the course of the fieldwork. That is achieved in part through extensive quotations from field diaries. There are 182 blocks of such quotations, many of which include snippets from multiple diaries, set in italics and scattered throughout the text. Included as well are reports on a study of the social context of fieldwork by socio-cultural anthropologists. I have mixed feelings about the result. The production of a field record self-consciously intended to be

the subject of sociological analysis seems to have fed upon itself to promote inclusion of aspects of field life arguably better forgotten. For example, once the fieldwork-tale of *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu 1977) as exclusionary symbol of power and object on which to urinate is inscribed in the field diaries, it becomes a legitimate topic for social-anthropological analysis (see Wilmore 2007, pp. 273-274). Yet interpersonal strife occurs in all workplaces and is thus not centrally what archaeology is about. Such reservations aside, this is clearly a work in the tradition of site monographs. Its innovations constitute a bid to expand the scope of such publications by setting an ambitious new standard for self-scrutiny of the process of fieldwork itself.

My second recent case is the monographic publication of the Çatalhöyük project, now at ten volumes (Hodder 1996, 2000, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2007, 2013a, 2013b, 2014a, 2014b). Since this is a contribution to the Neolithic archaeology of the Near East, *Zagros Flanks* is one of the specific 'greats' in relation to which this series can be understood as emplotted. The Çatalhöyük set is, by any measure, impressive. The nine volumes that I assembled at one time formed a stack 30.3 cm thick, weighing 16.3 kg. (I was missing volume 2). The full set includes 198 printed chapters, covering 4145 pages; most of the individual volumes include over two dozen authors. The project was a showcase for Hodder's own version of a reflexive methodology, reported in volume 2 (Hodder 2000; see also Hodder 1999). It is also inclusive in terms of subject matter and theoretical orientation. In its bid for epic status it presents itself as 'better'than its traditional predecessors in all measures: the record is examined more completely (phytoliths, starch granules, coprolites, etc.), with innovative technical capabilities (stable isotope evidence of diet, absorbs lipids in pottery), and more completely (with extensive tabular material provided in

CDs). Finally, the volumes are full of narrative strands – stories large and small, explicit and implicit, with multiple points of view and plenty of loose ends.

These recent monographs seem to incorporate all the aspects of characteristically archaeological narrative identified in Zagros Flanks. They are also innovative, particularly in their efforts scope of what is to be observed, recorded, and analyzed so as to include the process of archaeological research itself. Yet that expanded scope – including even the implied breaks with 'traditional' efforts – is to be expected in the epic tradition of archaeological monographs, in which new works are supposed to be 'better' than traditional greats.

Levels of Emplotment

The highest order plot in archaeological writings is their self-presentation as good archaeology, indeed, as 'better' archaeology than previous great works. That level of plot is particularly evident in site monographs, where it can be seen as actively shaping the form of and expansionist trajectory among such works. However, the meaning of a story taken as a whole hardly exhausts the terrain of plot, as Griffiths and Rabinowitz (2011) imply by identifying two levels of plot in epic, Ricoeur (1984) suggests by applying the term emplotment in a more specific way than White, and archaeologists find when their analyses of archaeological narratives reveal themes from multiple modes of emplotment in a single work. There appear to be at least three levels of emplotment in archaeological writings.

At the most general level, emplotment as epic is characteristic of archaeology as a discipline, stemming ultimately from the destructiveness of the practices that create archaeological evidence. Looking at archaeology through the lens of epic highlights the site monograph as the ideal type of a quintessentially archaeological narrative. The 'stories' told in such monographs

(or in functionally equivalent collections of texts) are complex, multi-stranded, multi-authored, ambiguous, and poised somewhere between observations of material objects and socially interpreted understandings built on such observations.

An agenda for critical analysis at this level might include exploration of what insights are to be gained by analyzing site monographs as stories. Where does the 'story' really lie? Does it reside in the material remains, is it imposed by the archaeologist, or are both somehow involved? This is a perennial and often theoretically sectarian debate in archaeology. Conceiving of the site monograph as a 'story' might help reconfigure the terms of debate. Further, to the extent that all parties are committed to the site monograph as a foundation of the discipline, that reconfiguration might promote a richer exploration of the 'both somehow involved' option. In my conclusions I will develop another topic for work at this level: the future of the site monograph itself.

The second level of emplotment concerns not the meaning of the messy whole of an archaeological narrative (typified by the site monograph) but the meaning of its parts, its constituent strands, or new works (potentially in category 3) that clean up the messiness to present a clearer story. At this level, an important theme is recognition of how archaeological texts present a reading of material evidence in terms of pre-existing storylines. Interpretation by the archaeologist imposes a story on the evidence, but that operation is reversed in the presentation of results, so that it appears that the story emerged naturally from the data. This is the level of emplotment that has been given the most attention in the critical literature on archaeological narrative (in its consideration of ideology and metanarrative). However, this also appears to be the most likely level for tracing the role of generic story structures such as romance, tragedy, and comedy. Indeed, one question for consideration at this level is to what

extent the current focus on contextually specific metanarratives (material progress, Orientalism, the inevitability of Western colonialism) could be enriched by considering also the role of more generic plot structures. A related issue that to my knowledge has not been seriously pursued is the critical narrative analysis of the 'story of the fieldwork' told in archaeological writings. To the extent that self-reflexive examination of the process of knowledge creation is established as part of the expected scope of the site monograph (e.g., Bender et al. 2007), it will become important to examine the *sources* of our fieldwork narratives. It seems likely that we will find standard plot structures used to imbue the events of the fieldwork with meaning. Will the stories of our own fieldwork be more clearly emplotted in Whitean terms than our narratives of the past?

The third level of emplotment – revealed in structural analyses of archaeological stories by Ballard (2003), Landau (1991), Pluciennik (1999), Rudebeck (1995, 1996, 2000), and Terrell (1990) – is closer to plot in the traditional sense since it involves logical relations among the elements of archaeological narratives. We have strayed here from 'emplotment' in White's sense, but we are within Ricoeur's (1984, pp. 64-70) conception of the term as referring to an active configuration that mediates between (among other things) the individual elements and the story as a whole. The topic at this level is how narratives in archaeological writings work as stories. In the existing literature, Vladimir Propp's (1968) formalist analysis of Russian folk tales has been influential (e.g., Landau 1991, Terrell 1990). Ricoeur (1984) may provide other interesting avenues to pursue. It is interesting, for instance, to trace the weighty implications he derives from the *heterogeneity* of elements mediated by plot ('agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results' [Ricoeur 1984, p. 65]). That heterogeneity is a factor in the complex structure of linkages that he traces between narrative and nomothetic explanation (Ricoeur 1984, pp. 115, 127, 182-186, 192), a relevant point for a pluralistic archaeology seeking

to overcome increasingly sterile but nevertheless difficult-to-escape tensions such as explanation-versus-interpretation. It is intriguing that his description of what emplotment achieves recalls the goals of *processual* archaeology: ‘to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic’ (Ricoeur 1984, p. 41; see also Ballard 2003, pp. 144-145 on the relation between stories and models and Moore 1990 for a review of Ricoeur for archaeologists). My point is that further work on emplotment at this level, still underdeveloped in archaeology, is of potential relevance to diverse rather than narrow theoretical perspectives.

To summarize the three levels in reverse order, archaeological writings are emplotted by the internal configuration elements, by appeal to storylines that already exist in a larger social context, and by references to the discipline itself, manifested as a bid to exemplify good archaeology. At the most specific level, critical analysis of emplotment considers how archaeological stories work on their own terms and the patterns that emerge therefrom. Of the three, analysis at this level is least developed. The middle level, by contrast, is the subject of an extensive and rapidly growing literature. Analysis here examines the two-way street between archaeological narrative and social context. Analysis at the broadest level includes consideration of the initial rendering of material remains in textual form. The logic involved has been relatively well studied by philosophers of archaeology and archaeologists themselves, but it is not always seen as a problem of writing and narrative. When ‘narrative’ is associated only with the middle level, it begins to appear to be something extra, unconnected with the data, and even illegitimate, whereas instead it is fundamental to the social purpose of archaeology. Integrated analysis of emplotment at all three levels provides hope of revealing not just the fictions of archaeology but also its truths.

Conclusions

To emplot a narrative as epic is to present a big, complex story – set in the past, with a vast scope, multiple plots and a serious purpose – as a legitimate member of a tradition of other such stories. This second-level plot is a meaning given to past events by the story itself (rather than by logical articulation of elements) and thus constitutes emplotment in the sense introduced by Hayden White. Emplotment as epic is identifiable in archaeological writings, though we would say that the narrative as a whole gives meaning not to 'past events' but to a diverse collection of artifacts, maps, plans, profiles, and contextual information; the difference between that and the 'past events' of White's formulation is, in part, what yields the site monograph as a characteristically archaeological form of narrative, poised uncomfortably between a description of archaeological materials and an interpretation of those materials in social terms.

Thinking of archaeological writings as emplotted in this way may help capture something of the disciplinary identity of archaeology in relation to history, a discipline with which it shares its general goal of understanding the human past. In secondary syntheses of archaeological work (category 3), issues of narrative and emplotment appear very similar to those in historical writing. It is in primary data monographs, site reports and other such works (category 1), that a characteristically archaeological form of narrative (large, multi-stranded, multi-authored, not confined to a single text) and mode of emplotment (as epic) are most evident. Even if we continually postpone actually publishing our site monographs, these, more than any other form of archaeological writing, encapsulate the identity of the discipline. The still-being-written monographs that will be definitive, comprehensive monuments to the profession (when we eventually finish them) are of course legion. The site monograph, in other words, encapsulates

the anxieties of and obligations on an archaeologist who has destroyed a segment of the archaeological record. Emplotment as epic is a textual expression of that identity.

It may well be asked: is there not also emplotment as epic in historical writing? What about the heroic confrontation with the archives? To that, one might easily add medical studies that follow subjects for many years, the vast concentration of resources needed to construct super colliders for physics experiments, and so forth. There is much heroism in research, and all academic writing presents itself as good work. The two basic features that make emplotment as epic particularly appropriate for archaeology are the great diversity of the relevant evidential record and the destruction of the contextual record wrought by the research process itself.

What would adding epic to romance, tragedy, comedy, and satire do to Hayden White's framework for the analysis of historical writing? Whether the epic mode of emplotment as presented here is consistent with White's scheme appears to me to depend on what passages from White's writings are seen as representative. Yet the four tropes were always White's primary interest, and they form an elegant set. Rather than worrying about what trope corresponds to epic, it might be more productive to consider multiple levels of specificity of tropes, akin to the levels of emplotment argued for in this paper. Archaeologists considering disciplinary tropes have conceived them at a more specific level than White (e.g., Terrell 1999, Thomas 2004, Harrison 2013).

Finally, what would be gained by considering archaeological writings to be emplotted as epic? It is *not* that archaeologists should strive more self-consciously to write epic. The idea is instead to direct attention to archaeological writings and their future – in particular, the future of the site monograph, currently in a state of crisis. On the one hand, archaeologists seeking a publisher for their monographs face ever greater skepticism. On the other hand, at least in the

USA, university administrators, with weapons like ‘impact factors’ and ‘h-indices,’ are trying with increasing success to establish unified scales for the (spurious) ‘measurement’ of all scholarship. To the extent that they are successful, they will undermine archaeology as an empirical discipline, since the impact achieved by great site monographs follows the model of the tortoise rather than the hare. There is the danger that future generations of archaeologists will never write their monographs, a danger made more acute as monumental collections like those of the Çatalhöyük Project raise the bar for the ‘great’ monograph to demoralizing heights. It seems certain that the future of the site monograph is digital, but we do not yet have a viable model. (Some of the CDs accompanying the Çatalhöyük volumes were already missing in the library copies I consulted.) It will be important to establish that digital archiving of field notes, photos, and databases, as important as that is, is no substitute for the interpretive contribution of the monograph. As we look to the future, one of the insights to be gained from the recognition that archaeology is emplotted is epic is that a viable model for the future of the site monograph needs to incorporate the expectation of continued expansion of epic scope: as long as archaeology remains a viable empirical discipline, we should expect to find archaeological writings emplotted as ‘better’ than their predecessors.

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