# WELSH MEMORIES IN A CRETAN LANDSCAPE



I am on a short visit to Crete.

Elounda, Lasithi. Out east. Past the prehistoric ruins of Malia, to where Chris (Witmore) and I drove in the Renault convertible on an impromptu photo shoot. It’s been twenty five years since.

Another visit now to liquid commingling times.

## A dappled landscape

I look out over a dappled landscape. Low, rounded, dark green thorny shrubs, exposed limestone and schist, patches of bare earth and rock. Phrygana and maquis ecologies. Old olive groves. Many unmaintained stone terrace walls. A summer palette of dark-spotted pale browns and silvers.

And development. Holiday properties, white-painted. Blue pools. Clustered,

scattered.

To the north east across the bay is Spiralonga – Venetian fortress, Ottoman acquisition, one of the last leper colonies in Europe. To the south at Elounda is where once was the ancient city of Olous, its ruins now mostly only visible beneath the shallow waters on either side of the causeway that separates the mainland from the island of Kalydon.

The stark contrast between the white-painted houses, blue pools, and the sun-parched scrub might suggest a story of people working the land and the land returning to its own organic wildness.

No. One must remember that what one is amongst is a manifestation of perhaps 7,000 years of grazing, repeated cycles of burning, works of terracing and abandonment, charcoal production, olive cultivation, and intermittent construction projects. What appears “wild” is in fact a long-lived cultural milieu. The phrygana is not simply vegetation recovering from human disturbance – it is part of a dynamic equilibrium between people, animals, climate, stone, and plants.

The scrub is not merely a backdrop to human effort, but a living medium that both reveals and conceals traces. It obscures walls, softens abandoned terraces, carries the scents of thyme and sage released by the sun, and frames the experience of moving through the landscape. With the goats. The vegetation itself becomes one of the enduring agencies through which the deep past continues to be encountered.



South of Plaka, north of Elounda. Spiralonga in the distance.

## Brith Gof

The dappled speckled mottled milieu brings back to me the Welsh name Mike and Cliff gave to a company of performers who worked with sites, their hosts, ghosts, and visitors – Brith Gof.

Brith Gof – “speckled memories” is a rough interpretive translation.

### Brith

The Welsh adjective *brith* is a rich semantic field. Its basic meaning is: speckled, dappled, mottled, piebald, variegated, many-coloured, flecked with contrasting marks. It describes surfaces that are irregular rather than uniform: the feathers of a bird, lichens on stone, weathered rock, shifting light through leaves, woven textiles, skin marked with freckles.



Perhaps the best-known example is *bara brith*, a Welsh “speckled bread,” whose raisins and currants create the characteristic mottled appearance.

But *brith* is more than visual. Welsh literature often uses it metaphorically for things that are mixed, fragmentary, or textured by time. Rather than a smooth whole, *brith* suggests: traces, interruptions, fragments, surviving patches, incompleteness.

Figuratively, *brith* shades into mixed, impure, faint, indistinct — even morally chequered: a *bywyd brith* is a shady or eventful life.

Brith is archaeological.

## Gof

*Gof* literally means smith, blacksmith or worker in metal.

The persona reaches back to Proto-Celtic *goben-* (“smith”). It also survives in Celtic mythology in figures such as *Goibniu* and the Welsh *Gofannon*, divine

craftsmen associated with making, transformation, and even hospitality.

The smith occupies a remarkable place in the Celtic imagination. *Gof* is not merely a fabricator. They smith transforms matter, mediates between fire and earth, reshapes, gives form through labor. The smith is synchronously an artist, engineer, and magician.

## A (more-than-phenomenological) field of metaphor

There is more.

*Brith gof* is an established Welsh idiom – *mae gen i frith gof* means "I have a vague recollection" – that everyday sense of a memory that is partial, flickering, half-recovered. Con-fabulated (exactly the correct term for what is typically called the hallucinations of generative AI!). Note the mutation: the noun is actually *cof* (memory), softened to *gof* because in Welsh an adjective placed before its noun – a marked, poetic word order – triggers soft mutation. And that mutation opens a lovely ambiguity. *Cof* memory, and *gof* smith. Brith Gof can be misread, productively, as "speckled smith" – memory as something forged, hammered, worked at heat – a doubleness of which Cliff McLucas was so fond.

In English, "dappled memory" or "speckled remembrance" catches the surface, but the idiom really means something closer to "a dim trace of recollection." There's a resonance here with Gerard Manley Hopkins's "Pied Beauty" – his praise of "dappled things" was written by a poet steeped in Welsh and *cynghanedd* (an intricate, ancient Welsh poetic system of sound harmony, alliteration, and internal rhyme), and *brith* is precisely his pied, counter, original, spare, strange.

For a company of performers making site-specific work from the ruins and residues of (Welsh) industrial and rural memory, theatre/archaeology, the name *Brith Gof* compresses all of this: recollection as fragmentary, variegated, and – if you hear the smith in *gof* – actively forged rather than simply retrieved.

## An archaeological sensibility – Welsh metaphor in eastern Crete

The phrygana hillside here in Elounda is *brith* in the most literal sense – a dappled surface where nothing is continuous: cushions of thorny burnet and cistus,

bare marl, a terrace riser slumping back into scrub, an olive gone feral among carob. But the speckling isn't decorative; it's evidential. Each patch is a varied trace of intervention — grazing pressure here, an abandoned lazy-bed there, fire, coppicing, the slow revenge of spurge on a field last ploughed in the 1950s.

The landscape around Elounda is a memory that only exists as variegation. There is no continuous text to read, no stratigraphic narrative laid out in order — just motley, the *siaced fraith* of seven millennia worn inside out. This is exactly the *brith gof* idiom: not "the past remembered" but a dim, partial, heterogeneous recollection in which the fragments don't share a color, a period, or even an ontology (a Minoan sherd, a salt-pan revetment, a goat path, an EU-funded track sit in the same visual field with equal claim).

The archaeological sensibility is precisely the disposition that takes this motley as its medium rather than its problem — attending to trace, residue, and remainder without demanding that they resolve into narrative. *Brith gof* gives that sensibility a name with two productive torsions. First, the idiom's modesty: *mae gen i frith gof* is what one says of a memory one can't quite substantiate. The dappled hills attest to inhabitation but won't testify; they offer attestation without deposition. Walking the maquis is having a *brith gof* on the landscape's behalf — recollection as an act performed in the present, in the body, moving through thorn and heat-shimmer, a snorkeled-swim in the shallows, rather than retrieved from an archive.

And then the smith. If you let *gof* ring as blacksmith — the Elounda country is a speckled forge: memory not found but worked, hammered, annealed. This is apt for a place where the "natural" landscape is an artifact through and through — phrygana is itself an anthropogenic vegetation regime, forged by browsing and burning, maintained at heat. It's doubly apt at Olous, where the sunken city under the channel is periodically re-forged by every snorkeller, every guidebook, every isthmus-crossing tourist; and at Spinalonga, where Venetian fortress, Ottoman village, and leper colony have been beaten into a single glinting object of visitation. The dapple, in other words, is not the erosion of memory but its mode of production. A *brith gof* sensibility would resist the conservator's fantasy of restoring the hillside to one colour — one period, one story — and instead work the mottle: mosaic (*brithwaith*) as method, the trout-flank shimmer of pasts surfacing and submerging as you move.

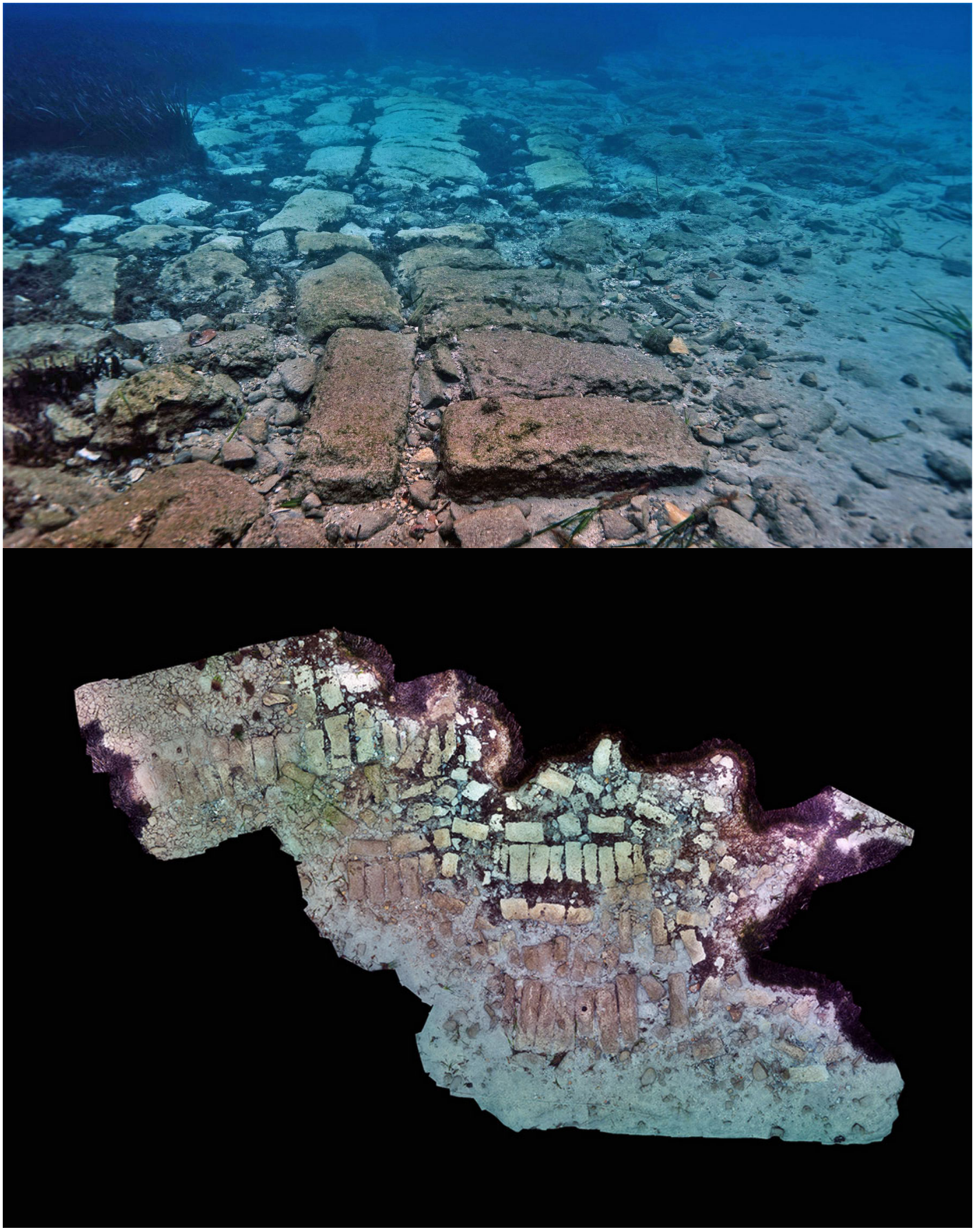
There’s a last and critical resonance worth pushing to the fore: *brith* shading into the morally chequered, the *bywyd brith*. These hills are not innocent dapple — enclosure, maritime colonial enterprise, depopulation, quarantine, the extractive salt monopolies, now the enclave hotels along the gulf. A speckled memory of Elounda that stayed picturesque would be Hopkins without the counter and the strange. The forge is still hot.

## Hosts, visitors, ghosts

Eva, the boat captain who took us to the ruins, commented that not much is made of the historical heritage of the region around Elounda and Spiralonga. She says few people ask about the ruins. A visit to Spinalonga is a visit to an unstoried ruin — you need to do serious homework to figure out its well-preserved remains. She doesn’t visit Spiralonga to show her four children. But she knew exactly where to look for the city beneath the sea.



Over the city beneath the sea — south western extension of the island of Kalydon



Underwater images from

https://www.archaeology.wiki/blog/2021/03/09/underwater-research-of-ancient-olous/

The interesting thing isn't that heritage effort is absent here — it's that it's been directed almost entirely at fabric and at a single narrative, leaving the deep and variegated currents of archaeology and history essentially uninterpreted.

Take the money and attention first, because they're not lacking. Spinalonga sits on Greece's UNESCO tentative list, with a formal nomination assembled from 2018–19 by the Ministry of Culture, the Lasithi Ephorate and the Municipality of Agios Nikolaos. Spiralonga receives something over 300,000 visitors a year — Crete's second-busiest archaeological site after Knossos. Successive EU-funded phases (the 2019 round alone was around €900,000) have gone into it. So the region is not neglected in the budgetary sense. But look at where that effort lands: the stated priority has been making the Venetian and leper-colony buildings structurally safe, and secondarily preserving their architectural character. That's conservation of the material, not interpretation of the meaning — and the two are routinely confused in heritage practice, where "we spent millions on the site" is offered as if it answered the question "what does the site tell a visitor?"

Then there's the narrative monoculture. Spinalonga's fame is overwhelmingly driven by the story of the island becoming a leper colony, amplified by Victoria Hislop's *The Island* and its Greek television adaptation. The island has been framed as a "topos" of isolation and suffering — even commissioning an original musical work by Xydakis and Kapsalis around exactly that theme. It's a genuinely powerful story and it sells the boat tickets, but it flattens everything underneath it. The Venetian bastion engineering, the Ottoman settlement phase, and above all the ancient stratum — Olous, the sunken polis, the Hellenistic harbour, the early-Christian basilicas — are narratively crowded out. Eva's clients arrive for lepers and leave with lepers. The 3,000 years before 1903 are, interpretively, a rounding error.

The structural reasons are worth naming, because they're not local laziness. Greek heritage governance is highly centralized and object-and-fabric-focused; the Ephorate model grew out of excavation and conservation, where institutional prestige and funding have historically sat, and public interpretation has been a downstream afterthought. Compounding that, the portable meaning of Olous has been physically removed from the isthmus — the votive material, the inscriptions, the coins that have been found are dispersed to the museums at Agios Nikolaos and

Heraklion. The site is curated as emptied stone while its content lives in vitrines elsewhere.

This is a fairly exact instance of what Laurajane Smith calls authorized heritage discourse: the expert institution conserves the fabric and relocates the meaning, and the place itself is left mute. And the underwater dimension makes it worse — submerged, fragile, weather-dependent, genuinely hard and expensive to present, and only recently surveyed (the FORTH/Ephorate work is still being processed and has never been turned outward into public-facing interpretation).

The interpretation isn't missing. It's just not *authorized*. Eva is the interpretation — a boat captain narrating the ruins over the side of her vessel is doing precisely the embodied, oral, situated meaning-making that the agencies aren't. That vernacular layer is real and, in some ways, better: it's responsive, it's performed, it's tied to the actual encounter with the water and the wall-tops rather than to a laminated panel. The lack of official mediation is exactly what leaves the site open to being read directly — snorkelled over, puzzled out, narrated by whoever knows it. For a visitor with an archaeological sensibility that under-determination is a gift; the place hasn't been pre-digested. The problem is that this is a privilege of the equipped visitor. For the general public, "no authorized interpretation" doesn't mean liberating openness — it means the deep history is simply invisible, and they default to the one story that has been told for them.

So Eva is right that authorized, on-site, deep-time interpretation is thin to absent, and she's right to notice it — but the situation isn't under-investment, it's mis-direction, toward fabric over meaning and toward one legible narrative over a layered one. And the more provocative point is that the gap she's identifying is being quietly filled by exactly the kind of vernacular, performative, distributed knowledge that authorized heritage tends not to count as interpretation at all. The captain narrating the sunken city is the region's actual interpretation infrastructure. Whether that's a failure to be corrected or a condition to be cultivated is, I think, the genuinely open question — and not one the Ephorate is currently framed to ask.



A Welsh bread – Bara Brith

## Post Script – city beneath the sea

Deep temporal processes. Geology as agent in a post-phenomenological ecology.

Tectonic setting and why Olous is under water.

Geologically, Crete is the emergent crest of the Hellenic forearc, riding above the African plate as it subducts beneath the Aegean, and the island as a whole has been

rising over the long term — net uplift rates on the order of 2.5–3 mm/yr, though that average hides alternating episodes of uplift and subsidence over 10,000-year timescales. Crucially, the movement is not uniform. In the great earthquake of AD 365 the western tip of Crete was thrown up by as much as 9 m and the whole block tilted, while central and eastern Crete subsided along a tectonic boundary corresponding to the Spili graben. Western harbours like Phalasarna were left stranded high and dry; the northeast coast around Mirabello sat on the down-tilted side and has experienced relative submergence, which is why Olous — along with Chersonisos and Mochlos — has drowned Hellenistic and Roman shorelines.

Olous did not sink beneth the sea in a single disastrous event. Instead it was a long-lived, episodic tectonic submergence of a down-warped coast, very possibly with coseismic steps, rather than a single event. The nuance is that over much longer timescales eastern Crete does show net uplift too, recorded in raised marine terraces with a northward tilt — the historical-period signal on this particular coast is submergence, superimposed on slower long-term rise.

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# SOME ARCHAEOLOGICAL NOTES ON FUTURES STUDIES



# The Janus Maneuver

Hindsight, foresight, and futures studies

*Everyone, it seems, is a futurist now. Here are some loosely gathered thoughts on why an archaeology of design may be a missing foundation.* These are notes – so expect inaccuracies and mistakes of memory (hopefully minor).

**After Janus – the divine principle of looking both back and forward to gain perspective on the threshold between past and future.**

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The future continues to grow – as a matter of concern. Strategic foresight and scenario planning, once the fringe pursuit of Cold War strategists and oil-company planners, has gone thoroughly mainstream. The World Economic Forum and the big consultancies now call foresight essential rather than nice-to-have. The 2025 *Growing Foresight* study, produced with the World Futures Studies Federation, counts a swelling profession of practitioners; World Futures Day fills a twenty-four-hour global conversation; "Chief Futurist" has become a plausible job title; and a small industry of trend reports and scenario decks circulates through boardrooms and conference halls, and beyond.

I welcome this. For most of my career the long view had to be smuggled into strategy under cover of darkness; that it now walks in the front door is good news. I have spent nearly 50 years years looking in what is taken as another temporal direction, backwards, though more accurately, as I have always been concerned to stress, archaeologists like myself actually work with remains and with a view to the future. Here, then is a friendly, archaeological perspective on this popular field: an appreciation, a concern, and a foundation.

## What the field of futures studies actually is

"Futures studies" is not one thing but several braided traditions, and it helps to untangle them. There is **forecasting**, the oldest reflex – the attempt to say what *will* happen, refined by Herman Kahn and the RAND analysts into something more disciplined than prophecy. There is **scenario planning**, which Pierre Wack and his colleagues at Royal Dutch Shell turned in the 1970s into a craft of structured imagination: not predicting the future but rehearsing several of them, so that an organisation is not ambushed by the one that arrives. There is the now-ubiquitous **futures cone**, first sketched by Trevor Hancock and Clement Bezold and popularised by Joseph Voros, with its gradation of the possible, the plausible, the probable

and the preferable — four words that have done more to discipline loose talk about "the future" than any amount of theory. There are **Jim Dator's laws** from the Hawaii school: the future cannot be predicted, because it does not yet exist; but alternative futures can be imagined and preferred futures envisioned — and any useful idea about the future should at first appear ridiculous.

Closer to my own practice, there is the work of my colleague Riel Miller at UNESCO on **anticipation and futures literacy** — the insistence that "using the future" is a *capability* to be cultivated rather than a forecast to be purchased, and that, well handled, uncertainty becomes a resource rather than a threat. There is **speculative and critical design** — Anthony Dunne and Fiona Raby, the design-fiction practitioners — who make futures *material*: objects and props you can argue with. And there is Sohail Inayatullah's **causal layered analysis**, which drills past the headline "litany" of trends, through systems and worldviews, down to the layer of myth and metaphor — and warns that most of us are quietly living a "used future" borrowed second-hand from someone else.

To its credit, the field of futures studies also keeps up a vigorous self-critique. Ziauddin Sardar's provocation that "futures studies is futureless" — that it bears its fruit in the present — still stings productively, as does his long-standing worry, and that of today's decolonising-futures work, about who gets to *colonise* tomorrow. The best of all this loosens the grip of the present, makes uncertainty workable, and widens the space of the thinkable. I have no quarrel with it. A good deal of my own consulting lives happily inside this tent.

## An archaeologist's concern

And yet. Spend time in this field and you notice something strange in a discipline supposedly devoted to time: it has almost no past. And the concept of temporality is extraordinarily The arrow points relentlessly forward. The past, when it appears at all, is a launch pad to be escaped — a baseline, a trend line to extend, a legacy to disrupt. At its weakest the field becomes what its own best thinkers warn against: extrapolation in a smart suit, the trend deck mistaken for thought, foresight sold as a product. There is a tyranny of the new in it, an assumption that the future is mostly a matter of what is arriving rather than what endures.

What is missing is hindsight — and not as nostalgia, nor as history ("what happened in the past"). Even the field's sharpest anti-predictionists, who rightly insist

the future cannot be foretold, rarely treat the *past* as a live resource for making futures. They look forward without looking back. To an archaeologist who insists that we always work with remains, this is a professional irritation, and an opportunity. For it turns out that the thing the field most lacks — a worked-out philosophy of time, materiality, and how knowledge is made — is exactly what four decades of archaeological theory and practice have been building.

## A foundation: an archaeology of design



The Janus we work under is not a logo applied to a consulting playbook. Janus, the Roman god of doorways, was given two faces because you cannot pass cleanly through a threshold while looking only one way. Behind that image lies a research paradigm with a long pedigree, and it is worth setting out, because it is what makes archaeologically-informed foresight more than design foresight with a history lesson attached [Link] [Link].

It some ways, it began in the 1980s, in two books written with Chris Tilley – the "red and black" books, as they got called, that helped turn archaeology from its soft humanities and social-science orthodoxies toward something more situated and plural. The point was to model human societies as long-term genealogies of complex, living, adaptive systems, and to put *agency* – the capacity to make a difference, or not, in the ongoing work of worldbuilding (better, "worlding") – at the centre. That move carried a sharp critique of teleology that I have pressed ever since: the human story has no direction, no purpose, no end. There was no agricultural revolution and no urban revolution; the ancient city-state is a "zombie concept"; technology has never, on its own, instigated change; and modernity is not the destination toward which history was traveling. If the past was not a march toward the present, the future is not a march onward from it. Foresight, on this footing, is grounded in non-linear complexity and path-dependency, not in the extension of a curve.

The second layer in this archaeology is the deceptively simple proposition at the heart of *Experiencing the Past* (1992) and *The Archaeological Imagination* (2012 and extended in 2019): archaeologists do not recover the past; they work with *what remains*. And what remains is not "back there," over and done. Multiple pasts are around us now – archival traces that behave like memory, haunting, orienting, constantly reframing our lives and the stories we tell to make sense of things. This is the *actuality* of remains. Hindsight, then, is not background; it is live material. An organisation, a community, a landscape is a deposit of present pasts, and to design its future is to work *with* those remains, not to leave them behind. This is the precise sense in which foresight begins in hindsight.

The third layer is ontological. With Bjørnar Olsen, Christopher Witmore and Tim Webmoor I argued for a *symmetrical archaeology* – symmetry between people and things, past and present, the human and the non-human – set out in *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* (2012), with a lineage running through Whitehead and Bergson,

Michel Serres and Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway and Bruno Latour. Just as we, working with what remains, craft knowledge and build our world, so people in the past, in their dealings with things, built theirs. For foresight this yields a material, more-than-human account of organisations: “corporate DNA,” heritage, infrastructure and the life of artefacts are not metaphors but the actual stuff of which institutional futures are made. Futures are material assemblages, which is why prototypes and objects, not only forecasts, do the real work.

The fourth layer concerns how knowledge is made. In *Experiencing the Past* (1992), in *The Craft of Archaeology* (with Randall McGuire, 1996) and the conversations gathered in *Archaeology in the Making* (2013), I made and then documented the case that archaeology is a *messy pragmatics* – against method, immersed in the contingencies of funding, careers and institutional politics, far from the tidy procedure of the textbooks. Knowledge is crafted, not discovered; we are part of what we seek to understand. This is the root of the term we now use for the whole approach – *creative pragmatics* [Link] – and of its corollary for foresight: futures are *made and rehearsed*, in workshops, scenarios and prototypes, not predicted. The scenario is not a lesser substitute for a forecast; it is how futures-knowledge is properly built.

A fifth layer is easy to misread. I am highly skeptical of *narrative*, because narrative typically locks things down and stops us imagining how things might be otherwise. *Storytelling* – the performance of more-than-narrative that animates the archive – is another matter. The concept framing is of telling stories *with* the past, not *of* it. A current project with Gary Devore (*Antiquity: speculative scenarios*) conveys ancient lifeworlds not through a single storyline but through some forty-five personae and scenarios: speculative fabulation grounded in evidence. This is close kin to Inayatullah’s myth layer and to Dator’s alternative futures, but it brings to them an archaeologist’s craft of layered time.

And a sixth layer: performance. From the early 1990s, thirty years of collaboration with Mike Pearson and the arts company Brith Gof (and its other art director Cliff McLucas) produced *theatre/archaeology* – the rearticulation of remains as real-time event – and *deep mapping*, the layered description of multitemporal places that reaches back to the chorography of the early-modern antiquarians. In the Reinwardt Lecture of 2012, “Let me tell you about Hadrian’s Wall,” I argued that heritage itself is best understood as *performance design* – staging, dramaturgy, props,

player-performers. For foresight this means futures that are staged, prototyped and experienced; the scenario-story and the design sprint are forms of theatre in which a community rehearses what it might become.

## A bridge — speculative-design

These foundational layers were already doing futures-facing work in the museum more than a decade ago — and this is the bridge that connects my archaeology directly to the speculative-design wing of futures studies. Between 2012 and 2016 at Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, curator Annemartine van Kesteren ran a remarkable series of exhibitions, *Design Column*: each took a live matter of public concern and gathered works of speculative design that proposed ways of dealing with it. My role was to supply the commentary — the essay that set each concern in a longer frame — and the series contributed to the catalogue collection *Changemakers: The Transformative Power of Design*.

The point is precise. Speculative design — the tradition of Dunne and Raby, of design fiction — is now one of the most generative quarters of futures studies, exactly because it makes futures material and debatable. My experience at Boijmans shows an archaeology of design already curating and theorising that practice from the inside, and bringing to it what design-futures often lacks: a critical, historical, material depth — the long view that asks not only "what might we provoke?" but "what remains, what returns, what becomes of what was, what is this a continuation of?" It was, in effect, archaeologically-informed speculative design before the label existed.

## Archaeological foresight — why this is distinctive

Pull the layers together and they form a single philosophical geology, which Connie Svabo and I, with colleagues Tamara Carleton and Chunfang Zhou have named *creative pragmatics* — the hybrid of scholarship and art, the performance of knowledge, applied beyond the academy as "applied archaeology, applied humanities." [Link] What makes it a distinctive, arguably unique, contribution to futures studies is not that no one else attends to the past — some do — but that here the philosophical geology is *native and fully worked out*, while remaining dynamic, in metamorphic process. The field's better instincts gesture toward exactly these things without grounding them. Riel Miller's anticipation wants the future used rather than predicted; an archaeology of knowledge-as-craft tells us what that

means and how to do it. Speculative design wants futures made material; the archaeology of things supplies the ontology and the historical depth. Inayatullah's myth layer wants the deep story; archaeological mythography is a foundational practice of telling stories with layered time that reaches back beyond early modernity into antiquity and even prehistory. Dator and the futures cone insist the future cannot be predicted; an archaeology of non-linear complexity explains why, and *what to do instead*.

Archaeologically-informed design foresight, in short, is a distinct paradigm in which hindsight and foresight are a single operation — the Janus operation — and in which futures are crafted from the material remains of the present.

## Some summary thoughts

Compressed into a working creed — here are some pointers for a futures practice that remembers it has a past:

1. **Foresight begins in hindsight.** You cannot pass through a threshold looking only one way. Researching where we have come from is not a preface to strategy; it is part of it.

2. **The future cannot be predicted — only prepared for, imagined, and rehearsed.** Treat anyone selling certainty about tomorrow with the suspicion they have earned.

3. **Treat the future as material, not forecast.** It is something to be made, prototyped, curated and inhabited — modelled in stories and objects you can argue with — not a curve to be extended.

4. **Anticipation is a capability to cultivate, not a product to buy.** The aim is to make a community more futures-literate, not to hand it a report.

5. **Mind the deep time.** Respect path dependency, the long present, and the slow variables that outlast every quarter’s trend.

6. **An organisation’s past is its richest design resource** — its material culture, heritage, accumulated know-how, its “corporate DNA.” Read the deposit before redesigning the site.

7. **Ask whose future.** Futures are plural and political; an honest practice widens the circle rather than colonising tomorrow on behalf of the few.

8. **Strategy is kairos as much as chronos.** Cultivate the judgement to seize the ripe moment, not merely the analysis to map the trend.

9. **Grow futures literacy in communities, not just forecasts in boardrooms.** The durable work is shared, distributed and learned together.

## The future has a past

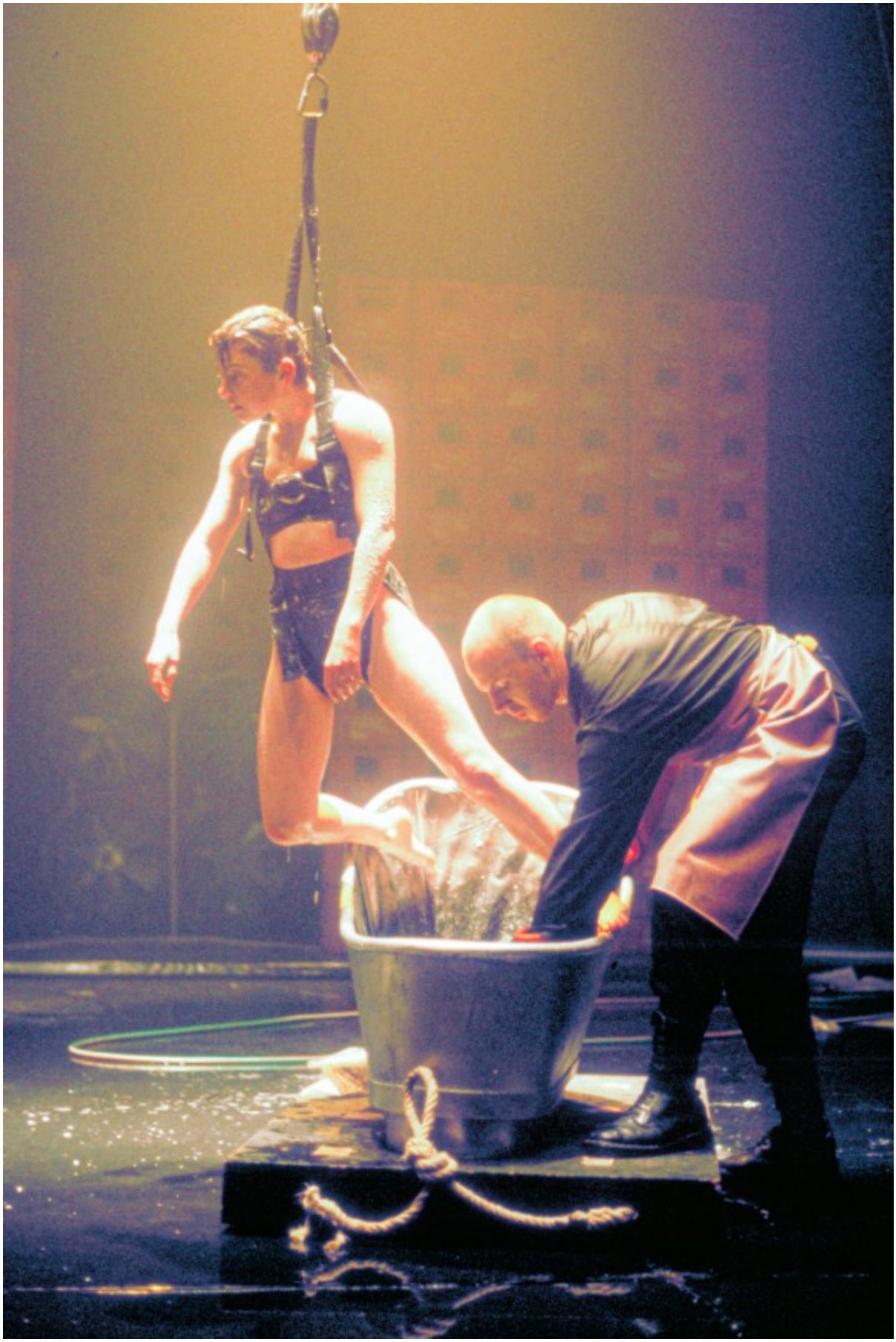
Janus presided over beginnings — over January, over doorways — precisely because this divine principle understood that every threshold has two sides, and that you orient yourself by holding them together. The popular field of futures studies has taught a great many people to look up and out, to widen their sense of the possible; that is a real gain. My small, stubborn contribution is to ask them also to look back and down — into the ground, the archive, the accumulated material life of the institutions and communities they hope to change. The future, it turns out, has a past, and treating that past as a live resource rather than dead weight may be the most practical foresight of all.



Janus as Venus. Giulio Romano (early 16th century).

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# NEWSLETTER — STANFORD ARCHAEOLOGY CENTER



Prospective reflections on 2025-26

# Acting with nature – prehistory

My new book *Archaeologies of Nature: Activating the Archive*, written with Gabriella Giannachi, University of Exeter and Turin, is now complete and in production. Open Access – it will be available as PDF in June 2026.

We use an archaeology of artworks to probe human relationships with the environment – how people have got on with nature from then to now, and beyond. We examine how the concept of nature has been imagined, performed, and transformed in artworks across eight millennia. Rather than presenting a linear history, the book unfolds as an archaeology – an excavation of artworks as strata of environmental imagination. The book explores ways that one might connect with the environment in our contemporary times of precarious climate breakdown and runaway extraction of natural resources.

We begin with prehistory, not as a remote "before" but as a persistent, resonant layer of the present – a concept that unsettles the conventional divide between nature and culture, and offers a genealogical complement or alternative to historiographical accounts of "what happened in history".

Informed by new archaeological research we question orthodox accounts of the emergence of agriculture in Mesopotamia, of megalithic monuments built by early farming communities in Atlantic Europe, and of petroglyphs in the bronze age of northern Europe. In so doing we make three key points: the prehistory of settlement is founded upon the confluence, the distributed ontology of nature-culture; place-making and marking-the-land are key modes of geopoetic engagement; artwork is well conceived less as expression, and better as mode(s) of engagement. We argue that nature has always been a relational, performative field – a co-production of human and more-than-human agencies.

In an excavation of past relationships with nature that have endured and experienced metamorphosis, the book moves through six strata, the basis of the six main chapters: Landscape | Presence, Environment | Performance, Ecology | Systemics, Anthropocene | Deep Time, Climate Breakdown | Activism, and Immanent Futures. Each explores how artworks have faced, framed, and acted with (and against) nature – from the invention of a modern concept of landscape in the

Renaissance, through ecological and performative art in the twentieth century, to today's activist and posthuman practices. The book proposes that artwork does not so much represent nature; artwork *enacts* nature. Every artwork we examine is both archive and experiment, a field of correspondences between material and imagination, between what remains and what becomes. In sum there is no need to find answers to the challenge of how to act with nature and the environment. Attunement to the resonances of long-standing relationships offers ready-to-hand modes of practicing ecosophical care in times of crisis.



Ships in an ocean of granite. Madsebakke, Bornholm Denmark. Prehistoric petroglyph. [Link]

## We are part of what we seek to understand – against the "reception" of the past

In *Archaeologies of Nature* we offer a genealogy, an archaeology of the concept of nature that takes us to antiquity and beyond in their actuality, their presence-at-hand (and yes, we acknowledge Nietzsche's and Foucault's "effective" histories as archaeological). So last summer 2025 I found myself returning to some poets of

Graeco-Roman antiquity – Horace's rural locales (via a beautiful small-press hand-crafted edition I found in Bell's Books, Palo Alto), to the genre of the pastoral, to Hesiod's *Works and Days*, the concept of *phusis* in presocratic and Aristotelian thought, to an old favorite of mine, Lucretius. After all, one of my academic homes is the Department of Classics!

None of this can be described as a *reception* of antiquity, the term usually used to refer to the study of afterlives of classical antiquity. Instead, I work within and upon the classical lineages of thought and practice that extend through the Euro-Mediterranean tradition and into the plural Atlantic modernities of the present. I am not claiming a kind of cultural inheritance to be defended, nor a canon to be discarded, but a terrain of post-classical legacy – a living field of translation, adaptation, and contestation. Not the "*heritage*" of cultural inheritance and property belonging to "us". These genealogies in poetry and the arts form an inherited *archive* of reason, imagination, and technique through which ideas of the human, the natural, and the political have been continually made and unmade.

There is no past "over-and-done" to be discovered. Remains are all around us. Animate the archive!

This is what we see as immanent critique: to inhabit an archive from the inside, attending to both its generative possibilities and its histories of exclusion and domination. Our methodology is radical – literally – digging into roots that ground not a single stem or trunk, but rhizomatic sideways-creeping, pervasive, irradicable, weed-like root systems. Ecologies of thought and practice (after Isabelle Stengers) – open to transformation – rather than bounded "Western" systems. Working within such critical humanist traditions entails, as Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing remind us, staying with the trouble: engaging the ruins and residues of the classical–modern world not in search of purity or progress, influence and inheritance, but in the hope of cultivating renewed forms of relation, care, and imagination.



Sycamore Gap, Hadrian’s Wall Northumberland UK. October 2020

I returned to the Roman north in a dark moody December 2025, to an iconic landscape setting. Sycamore Gap, as it came to be known, was one of the most photographed places in Europe, made famous in the Hollywood movie *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves* (1991), and featuring in many walkers itineraries along Hadrian’s Wall, one of the largest construction projects of antiquity, a landscape cleansed and conserved in the 19th century, and now on the World Heritage list. [Link]

In the early hours of September 28, 2023, the tree was cut down by Daniel Graham and Adam Carruthers who drove a couple of hours from their modest homes in the local town of Carlisle. The felling gained worldwide attention. What were they thinking, intending? Their motivation seems obscure. They did not make it clear in the hearings. It certainly seems to have nothing to do with the middle-class values of conservation of heritage of the National Trust and its members, the agency that owns and manages the wall. [Link]



December 2025. Done for a laugh, a lark, for a video posted on social media?

But is it such a mystery? Heritage is almost universally conceived as the inalienable cultural property of a community, a people, a nation state. “This is our land, our past.” Those wishing to act aggressively against the owners of such property, those who feel alienated from it, may well seek to damage or destroy it. Statues set up to commemorate the heroes of a community may be toppled in protest against the values of that community.

It’s our past too, not just yours! To do with as we please! In the break-up of Britain, the supposed United Kingdom, perhaps the motivation to cut down this icon of “national trust” was rooted in the same senses of ownership and of cultural inheritance so cherished by those horrified by the felling of the tree.

## Atmospheres and geologies – against “entanglement”

So, finishing the book ran alongside my regular fieldwork exploring the prehistoric, Roman, and early medieval landscapes of northern Europe.

I have been *deep mapping* this region for decades now [Link] – reframing landscape as performance, memory, and encounter – a choreography of traces rather than a fixed terrain in what Michel Serres well-described as percolating time and space. A mess of a place, out-of-place. Cliff McLucas, Mike Pearson and I, in theatre company Brith Gof,  borrowed the concept from William Least Heat Moon in the 90s to describe aspects of our site-specific theatre/archaeology. A symposium in September 2025, Venice and online, organized by Cristina Manzetti (University of Cyprus), and Valentina Mignosa (Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Digital and Public Humanities) celebrated the concept and field of *deep mapping*. I presented the keynote [Link].

A popular academic metaphor for the way one is mixed up in the natural world, in the world of artifacts, of other people and other species is entanglement. We are entangled in the world, in the past, so it goes. But the root metaphor remains textile: separate strands, threads, or lines become knotted together. This undercuts a stronger account of internal connectedness, in which things do not first exist independently and then enter relation, but arise through shared processes, pressures, media, and transformations. (And as expounded in symmetrical archaeology – *Archaeology: the Discipline of Things*, 2012, with Bjørnar Olsen, Chris Witmore, Tim Webmoor).

Three alternative metaphor families help reframe the issue.

**Atmospheric** metaphors emphasise medium, tone, pressure, and inhabitation. Terms such as atmospheric inheritance or heritage atmosphere describe how pasts persist not as discrete objects but as climates of perception: ways of seeing, feeling, valuing, omitting, and legitimating. One does not stand outside an atmosphere and inspect its connections; one breathes it. This is especially useful for heritage, where power often operates through mood, taste, silence, hospitality, signage, and "natural" assumptions of custodianship.

**Liquid** metaphors emphasise flow, mixing, turbulence, and confluence. Confluent historicity names the way pasts, presents, futures, human actors, non-human processes, myths, institutions, and materials move through one another, altering direction and force. Turbulent inheritance suggests temporary forms emerging within historical flow: eddies, vortices, and disturbances rather than fixed nodes or strands. Liquid metaphors preserve difference without presuming separability.

**Geological** metaphors emphasise pressure, deposition, transformation, erosion, and recrystallisation. Heritage diagenesis is especially useful: just as sediments are compacted, cemented, dissolved, and chemically altered after deposition, inherited pasts are transformed under later pressures of politics, memory, tourism, conservation, and desire. Weathered inheritance similarly names the slow alteration of forms through exposure, use, conflict, and changing moral climates.

Together, these alternatives shift the emphasis from external connection to internal formation. They replace the image of things tied together with things co-forming through medium, flow, pressure, and transformation. In this vocabulary, heritage is not an entanglement of past and present, but their atmospheric, liquid, and geological becoming.

## Archaeological sensibilities – against "big history"

Method in *Archaeologies of Nature*, and in my archaeology more generally, arises from an archaeological sensibility – a concept I have introduced and pushed to capture a disposition that attends to, is attuned to traces, remains, and recursions through time. This is working in the archaeological imagination, explored in what Mike Pearson and I called *theatre/archaeology*, and in *archaeography* – where the archaeological imagination meets photography (I delivered a hands-on manual and set of portfolios for archaeography at the beginning of summer 2025 [Link]). A forthcoming Routledge collection, *Archaeological Sensibilities*, edited by François Richard (Chicago), offers a wide-ranging survey of the concept through anthropology, literary studies, the arts and humanities; I contributed a summary commentary on the 20 or so richly worked case studies. It is gratifying to see the concept generating such fascinating work. Stanford's Mudit Trivedi has a lovely essay in the collection.

And so appropriate to an archaeological sensibility are the alternative metaphor families just mentioned. Attunement to atmospheres of past-presences.

Let me be technical again – we are academics after all! Iterative transduction is what one might call this methodology, after Gilbert Simondon back in the 1950s and taken up in work following Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in pragmatist science studies (for example Latour, Stengers, Pickering). This poetics in an archaeological sensibility is a recursive practice in which empirical engagement and conceptual reflection continually reshape one another. The work proceeds by

return. Each (archaeological) encounter begins in the empirical — the found, the seen, the touched — but never ends there. Observation folds into reflection; description becomes inquiry. What is discovered in the field unsettles what was once thought stable in the mind. This is not a cycle of confirmation but a choreography of transformation — an iterative transduction where matter and meaning continually exchange energies. This approach enacts the recursive and iterative dialogue between empirical encounter and conceptual reframing. Knowledge is not extracted but enacted; thinking is a form of fieldwork. Each return to site or concept becomes a performance of correspondence—a way of making sense through the rhythms of attention, revision, and return.

The world is partner, not data. This methodology is a well-understood means of handling complexity, whether it be environmental systems or the irreducible messiness of history. It's a way of connecting micro and macro scales of modeling, reconciling the universal principles of the natural sciences with the specific local contexts of technical application (design), retaining fine-grain empirical detail without reducing to the much-easier-to-handle schematic summaries and correlations to be found in much of "big history".

I push back against "big history" — marketed by the likes of Jared Diamond, Yuval Harari, Luke Kemp, and our own Walter Scheidel and Ian Morris. My quarrel is not with deep time or big questions of the shape of history, but with the genre — the universal synthesis that promises the essence of the human story and its lessons in a single volume.

Such a research and publishing contract forces a set of recurring faults. First, the prime-factor problem: each new historian typically corrects a predecessor only to nominate their own master key — geography, demography, epidemiology, energy, cognition, improvisation, dominance, networking, whatever. Second, the unit problem: the genre needs countable, bounded societies and other such entities such as states, with a birth and a death, yet the better historiography dissolves exactly that object. Rome does not end; it becomes Byzantium, canon law, the Latin Church, the juridical vocabulary of every successor state. Rome, one might easily argue, never "existed". What "collapses" is usually a ruling apparatus — a far smaller claim than civilizational death (Cline on the end of Bronze Age "civilization"!). Third, the aesthetics of survival analysis confer false commensurability on cases that are not of one kind (Kemp compares the so-called end

of the Bronze Age with contemporary Somalia). Fourth, narrative gravity – the tragic shape – bends the evidence toward tidy declines. Fifth, character returns by the back door, collapse blamed on pathological elites, reviving great-man history after disowning it, or celebrating the unnamed masses, for example. Sixth, a supposed origin becomes a moral anchor (such as Rousseau's original Eden). And throughout runs an unfalsifiable functionalism whose deep-time machinery supplies gravitas, **not** evidence (impress one's readers with the vastness and seriousness of one's historical scope). Instead – try stripping the history out and ask whether the present-day argument still stands.

The alternatives I am exploring begin by dropping the contract. The shape of history packaged into 600 pages – no deal. I lean on the specialist literature that already treats prehistory and antiquity as continuity, transformation, and entropic process rather than rise and fall, which makes the natural shape of an archaeological or historical project genealogical. More radically, I seek not a counter-thesis (as did Graeber and Wengrow, for example, in positing heterarchy as the motor of history), but ask which form and genre can hold a plural, multi-temporal past as a complex adaptive system without collapsing it into a single arc. The deep map, the layered atlas, the case study, polyphonic narrative, speculative fabulation, agent-based simulation, itinerary, theatre/archaeology?

It has only been in 2025 that a quest to counter the grandstanding of such historiography has come together, clarified. Our book *Archaeologies of Nature* has turned out to be something of a trial run or experiment, a prototype. So watch out for a trilogy over the next few years: *Prehistory: a Mythography*, *Antiquity: Speculative Scenarios*, *Modernity: an Archaeology*.

## Archaeological mythographies – an energy-field of the past-in-the-present-for-the-future

I have just mentioned mythography. Much of what passes for archaeology and history is less rooted in analysis of evidence than one might suppose, or, at least, serves to support familiar myths, by which I mean stock grand narratives of the human story – origins, progress, decline, nature/culture, social and technological revolutions and more. My theatre/archaeology (the rearticulation of remains as real-time event) continues to explore the roots of these myths with experiments in tropes and archetypes, this year with the development of archaeological theatre (photo tableaux and scenarios – inspired not least by Poussin's extraordinary

seventeenth-century classical tableaux).

The cure for bad myth is not no myth — that is not on offer — but myth practiced deliberately, critically, creatively, against-the-grain, and in the plural.



Brith Gof’s Haearn (Iron) (1992) – myths of Prometheus in the past-present vapors of theatre/archaeology. [Link]



Statue-to-be-toppled – Archaeological theatre after Michel Serres.



TVRRIS (tower) – archaeological scenography. Edlingham, Northumberland. [Link]

## Applied archaeology, pedagogy and learning – the continuing story

Published in March 2025, *Creative Pragmatics for Active Learning in STEM Education* (edited with Connie Svabo, Tamara Carleton, Chungfand Zhou) [Link] draws on more than 50 years of progressive pedagogical practice in Scandinavia, and exemplified in Stanford's design thinking, to outline programs to build the competencies to be

found in such grounded and action-oriented knowledge building. We launched the book in a plenary session of the annual meetings of the European Science Education Research Association in Copenhagen in August 2025 and at an online symposium in October.

Its praxis continues with *Trans Nation Co-Creation* – a new network of interests in leadership and innovation, led by Sabine Remdisch of Leuphana University, Visiting Scholar in my studio lab. This program of workshops, symposia and publication is now funded by the German Federal Ministry of Research, Technology, and Space.

More funding for research in this field of transdisciplinary art-science-humanities has come to me and Gabriella Giannachi from the Arts and Humanities Program BRAID (Bridging Responsible AI Divides) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council UK. The brief is to write a commentary – *The Archaeology of AI: Robots, Memory, and the Building of Knowledge*. Due in 2027. [Link] [Link]

*Acting with the World: Agency in the Anthropocene* is the title of a book by science studies scholar Andrew Pickering, also published in March 2025 [Link]. With elegant and compelling clarity he draws on lifelong research and makes the case for a sustainable science to be founded on a balanced, symmetrical relationship with what we seek to know. In contrast to our usual practice of acting-on the world, Andrew proposes a performance model for knowledge where one *acts-with* human, nonhuman and more-than-human agencies. And he has great case studies to show just what he means and what this entails – flood control on the Mississippi River, ecosystem restoration on the Colorado River, the Room for the River project and rewilding in the Netherlands, natural farming in Japan, Aboriginal fire techniques in Australia, and Amazonian shamanism. Our book *Archaeologies of Nature* draws similar conclusions from our excavation of artworks. His book ends with a call to implement ways of teaching the skills and competencies of a sustainable science that acts-with the world; he cites our book *Creative Pragmatics* as offering essential guidance and leadership in exactly such a future-oriented project that combines the arts, sciences, and the humanities.

# CHRISTINA UNWIN – DESIGN AND ARCHAEOLOGY



# Design and Archaeology

## THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY IN IRON AGE AND EARLY ROMAN EUROPE

Christina Unwin

BLOOMSBURY

Christina Unwin’s new book *Design and Archaeology* [Link] has just arrived.

A remarkable path-breaking work, this is the synthesis of archaeology, design studies, material culture studies that we have been waiting for – delivered in elegant case studies of textiles, gold-alloy torcs, shale vessels, and a copper-alloy armband from the world of iron-age and early Roman Europe.



# Design and Archaeology

## THE SOCIAL IMAGINARY IN IRON AGE AND EARLY ROMAN EUROPE

Christina Unwin

BLOOMSBURY

Here is what I wrote in the Foreword:

“What do the remains of artifacts and architectures tell us about the past?” “How might one understand past societies through the material remains of what they made?” Questions like these are at the heart of the archaeological project.

“What do people do with things?” “How are things made, improved, and made meaningful?” “How is knowledge mobilized in the making of things?” Such broader and closely related questions are shared with other disciplines such as anthropology (material culture studies), science and technology studies (STS), cognitive and behavioral psychology, and professional fields such as engineering and design. And more – these foundational questions of how (human) experience comes to build knowledge of the lifeworld we inhabit, and just what that lifeworld *is*, draw in philosophical debate around epistemology and ontology, materialist philosophies and object-oriented ontologies.

In this remarkable book Christina Unwin presents a synthesis and a clear pathway through these questions and concerns surrounding making and material culture, involving big pictures of cultural change and the social imaginary, situated in the context of the organization and management of production and consumption, even drawing in the technicalities of materials science and manufacturing techniques.

These matters of engaging with lifeworld through concept and intervention, imagining and making are not marginal academic concerns. Their wide range and scope may instill a disorienting dizziness – “Where is one to turn to find firm ground upon which one might decide to act when so much is entangled in complexity?” Yet such matters are inherent in any everyday experience of looking at a reproduction of an artwork hanging on one’s wall, of making and consuming a meal, in the kitchen artifacts and produce, in attending to a social media account, in the everyday choices (or lack of choice) regarding the ways one might manage one’s lifestyle – “What does this experience say of me and mine, and others?” “What are the qualities of the experience, and how might they be improved (in relation, for example, to concerns about economy and environment?”

This is a transdisciplinary space that transcends the boundaries of orthodox disciplinary understanding. For that reason alone it is challenging to navigate such a semantic field, whether one is an anthropologist, software engineer, or an

archaeologist.

Christina encompasses this challenging landscape. It is her unusual standpoint that makes this extraordinary achievement, this tour de force, possible – Christina is a professional designer as well as an archaeologist. She mobilizes her deep and practical understanding of the concept of design and of the design process in presenting “design archaeology” as method and theory that incorporates and transcends current approaches to material culture and artefacts in archaeology, and indeed in the anthropological archaeology of material culture studies.

Before I outline what I find so valuable in this book by Christina, let me offer some personal and anecdotal context for this mobilization of the concept of design.

What is design? Design can mean many things. It was precisely the professional practice of design that confirmed for me the significance of the concept, as well as its scope and ambiguities. As a kind of applied archaeologist or humanist, I had joined a teaching and research team in Stanford University’s d.school, the *Hasso Plattner Institute of Design*. Colleagues were Bernie Roth (a robotics engineer), David Kelley and Bill Moggridge (founders of design consultancy IDEO), Megghan Dryer (business designer at IDEO), Larry Leifer (pioneer in human-centered design and faculty lead in our *Center for Design Research*). My fondness for concepts as tools for practice as well as thought nudged me to press them for a definition of design. What emerged was a fourfold understanding.

**Design awareness.** Most people today are conscious that certain goods are marketed as offering added value because they are “designed”. While what this means is often left vague, there is widespread acceptance, even embrace, of the idea that “designer goods” carry a premium over those that are simply mass produced. A Kate Spade handbag/purse is not just any handbag/purse. The “iconic” iMac was designed by Jonathan Ive, head of design at Apple, and one might take it to represent an intangible commitment to something that the Apple brand cares to stand for, such as creativity. This marks it as different to a regular personal computer.

**Professional studio practice.** Product design, industrial design, high fashion, and architecture are highly professionalized fields organized typically into studios. Art and design schools offer training in the professional practice required to join such studios, or to set one up. Such studios have a long genealogy reaching back

into the workshops, ateliers and guilds of premodern societies. A major change occurred in the eighteenth century with the emergence of the figure of the industrial designer who stood apart from an integrated manufacturing process as one who conceives and plans. (It is vital to realize that such functions of management and decision-making are present in societies throughout history, in the teams that built the megalithic monuments of prehistoric Atlantic Europe, in the administrative bureaucracies of the Mesopotamian city states.) In this sense, one of the first industrial designers was Josiah Wedgwood, whose division of labor in his ceramic manufacturies involved a new and separate role for a designer who conceived and planned a range of goods that were mass manufactured by factory workers. Often, and as in the case of Wedgwood, such design studios are associated with their lead designer/founder – architects such as Rem Koolhas, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Zaha Hadid, for example, work(ed) in studio teams that nevertheless bear the stamp of their style.

**Design research.** This is the field, quite a recent one, that aims to understand how design operates. Questions typically focus on teamwork and division of labor, on integrated processes and systems of conception, procurement of materials, understanding of need and demand, prototyping, manufacture, distribution, consumption, curation and discard. Design research is the foundation for the academic field of Design Studies, though research might not be pursued for academic purposes – corporate design teams are research-based and may have no formal interest in academic output.

**Design thinking.** This term has come to be closely associated with the design group at Stanford, though it has been used elsewhere. While it might be summarized as human-centered design (emerging out of user-centered design in the information and communication technologies of Silicon Valley), design thinking is not actually *thinking* but a particular model of design *praxis* (informed and reflexive, self-conscious and iterative, flexible and improvising practice). Design as concept here refers to process, to project management. More than method and theory, design is a *pragmatics*, more or less formal sets of protocols to be pursued in projects aimed to deliver products, services, experiences, meanings, values.

In the 80s and 90s I had been part of the establishment of a sub-disciplinary field that came to be known as material culture studies. A branch of anthropology, it devotes attention to the materiality of culture, one of the defining features of

archaeology. The field took off at University College London, featuring the likes of Danny Miller, Chris Tilley, Victor Buchli, Suzanne Küchler, and has had a good deal of influence upon archaeology. Rooted in post-structuralism, Marxism, and phenomenology, the field responded to older anthropological models that treated objects as secondary to social structure or symbolic systems. Artifacts are treated as active agents, not passive but shaping social relations, memory, identity, and embodiment. There was a turn to materiality in everyday practice – how people live with, use, modify, and attribute meaning to things – in ethnographic focus (on shopping, clothing, housing, walking, looking), with consumption as a form of creative world-making, not merely passive reception of commodities.

But I was deeply puzzled. My work with ancient ceramics had led me to study contemporary studio pottery as a field of design. Encounter with science and technology studies in Paris in the early 90s led me to appreciate how making was always wrapped up in ways of knowing the world, and in embodied technique, know-how. Anthropologists in material culture studies were hardly making any reference to these fields. Experimental archaeologists, modeling past processes of making, made little reference, in my experience, to contemporary design. Most conspicuous was the absence of any engagement in archaeology with design studies, or even with the concept of design.

It ran the opposite way too. My colleagues in the d.school had never come across, but were fascinated by the big picture that an archaeological perspective offers on the workings of the design process – archaeologists draw upon such a wide range of case studies. Yet the field of design studies makes little reference to material culture studies, even less archaeology.

The reason for this lack of dialogue and integration around a fundamental concern such as making and materiality is to be found, of course, in disciplinary boundaries and research paradigms. This is a failing of contemporary academic research in the face of complex challenges in the world today that cannot be contained within any single discipline.

Let’s just consider material culture studies and design studies. They have quite different intellectual genealogies, one drawing upon anthropology, sociology, Marxism, and critical theory, the other evolving from art and industrial design schools, influenced by systems theory, ergonomics, cybernetics, and semiotics. The

two fields typically ask different questions: “What do people do with things?” versus “How are things made, improved, or made meaningful?”. They take a different view of the concept of “Design”.

Anthropologists may well be suspicious of design as an elitist or Western-centered and modern practice, contrasted with the everyday, lived engagements of people with things. In contrast, scholars like Margolin, Buchanan, or Forty have taken design as a crucial cultural and historical process, often linking it to power, modernity, or aesthetics. Different audiences and institutions: material culture studies emerged mainly within anthropology departments, with an emphasis on ethnographic credibility and theoretical innovation. Design studies developed in art schools, architecture programs, and interdisciplinary departments, focused more on production, usability, semiotics, and aesthetics with a methodology that involves historical, semiotic, or systems-based analysis, increasingly incorporating user-centered research into human-computer interaction.

Similar contrasts may be drawn with archaeology and the differences are, arguably, greater. Close affiliations in the nineteenth century with museum institutions and with the accumulation of artifacts through excavation of sites and monuments accompanied a focus upon the classification of artefacts into styles, periods, and cultures. This has provided a systematic framework for organizing archaeological data, a time-space systematics. Convergences with anthropological interests had long been favored by the institutional affiliation of archaeologists with academic departments of anthropology in the United States, and grew stronger with the roll out of processual archaeology from the late 1960s. Until the 80s at the earliest, representation (of social identity or socio-cultural process, for example) was favored over investigation of processes of making and consuming. At least in the Anglo-American sphere: French and German archaeological traditions are somewhat different, though neither took up the concept of design. Creative practices were largely invisible within this schema, except as witnessed in the distinction drawn between art and everyday artifacts, and until artifacts have come to be conceived as active agents in the negotiation of social life. Archaeology remains predominantly seen as concerned with the past, as a mode of historical knowledge; this remains the major obstacle to using the concept of design, when design, as indicated above, is typically associated with modern and contemporary processes of manufacture and consumption.

Christina bridges these divides. This is extraordinary and unusual. Hers is a comprehensive and transdisciplinary synthesis that takes in this broad disciplinary field. I suggest that this is the great strength of this book. And in this light, I want to offer a summary of what I see as Christina's key points of resolution and integration.

**Design – process**

Design is a fundamentally collaborative practice that links creative practitioners, communities, materials, and traditions. Designers and makers are presented as embedded within their societies, shaping and reshaping social identities through their work, in pragmatic improvisation that amounts to worldbuilding. Design is not limited to "high art" or individual genius but includes everyday creativity within households, workshops, and broader regional networks.

**Design – agency and worldbuilding**

Design is thus a concept that informs our understanding of agency. Agency is best understood as one's capacity, or lack of capacity, to act, to get things done, to perform everyday life, to effect change, however minor. Agency, manifested in design, is the building of lifeworlds. Agency is always thereby situated, involving relationships with other networked members of community, of ecosystem, conceived inclusively to incorporate non-human members too, things, materials, other species. This inclusivity involves the application of the concept of agency, symmetrically, to all components of the networked associations at the heart of design.

**Design – polychronic, transmedial, and associative**

Christina introduces design as three-fold mobility or fluidity – polychronic (bridging past, present, and future), transmedial (crossing materials), and associative (binding together people, artefacts, gestures, and meanings across time and space). This enables her to explore how designs circulate, are reused, remade, and repurposed in different contexts – especially important in societies facing change, such as her case studies in the Roman expansion into Iron Age Europe.

**Design – informed by contemporary practice**

Drawing on design studies, and particularly an understanding of design as pragmatic

process, Christina integrates contemporary concepts such as reflective practice, material thinking, collaborative prototyping, and creative improvisation into archaeological theory and method. She emphasizes workshop practice, transmission of skill, the interplay of emulation and innovation, and how new forms emerge through risk, experimentation, and collaborative reworking of traditions.

**Design – symmetrical past presences and futures**

The application of an explicitly contemporary understanding of design to archaeological case studies, and conceiving of design as polychronic involves a principle of symmetry between past and present. Just as we design our lifeworld, so too did people in the past. And more. Christina regularly refers to contemporary makers and designers. Archaeologists too are designers, working with the past to forge knowledge, and in future-oriented projects.

**Design – assemblages and conversations**

The designed artefact is an assemblage of attributes and relationships. To this Christina adds Flusser's emphasis on design as a way of "informing" materials with conceptual strategies. Artefacts become conversation pieces, involving commentary and critique, that carry forward the socio-political and aesthetic negotiations of their communities. Material culture is best understood as an evolving field of such design conversations that actively reconfigure communities in their socio-political environments and in their living adaptive ecosystems. In doing so, she advocates a hermeneutics of material-immaterial forms, emphasizing what remains invisible or residual—such as reuse, memory, affect, and display.

**Design – beyond art/craft, art/technology, material/conceptual binaries**

Christina is particularly critical of traditional archaeological typologies that divide material culture into binaries such as "art" and "craft," or treat "technology" as a separate domain. In the case studies she shows how such binaries obscure the entangled, emergent, and strategic character of Iron Age and early Roman creative practice – design. And how an emphasis upon a category of fine art has denigrated everyday making – she shows how a focus on elaborated "Celtic art" metalwork has marginalized the design significance of other media such as shale, wood, ceramic, or textile, despite their intricate techniques and conceptual sophistication.

**Design – for the future**

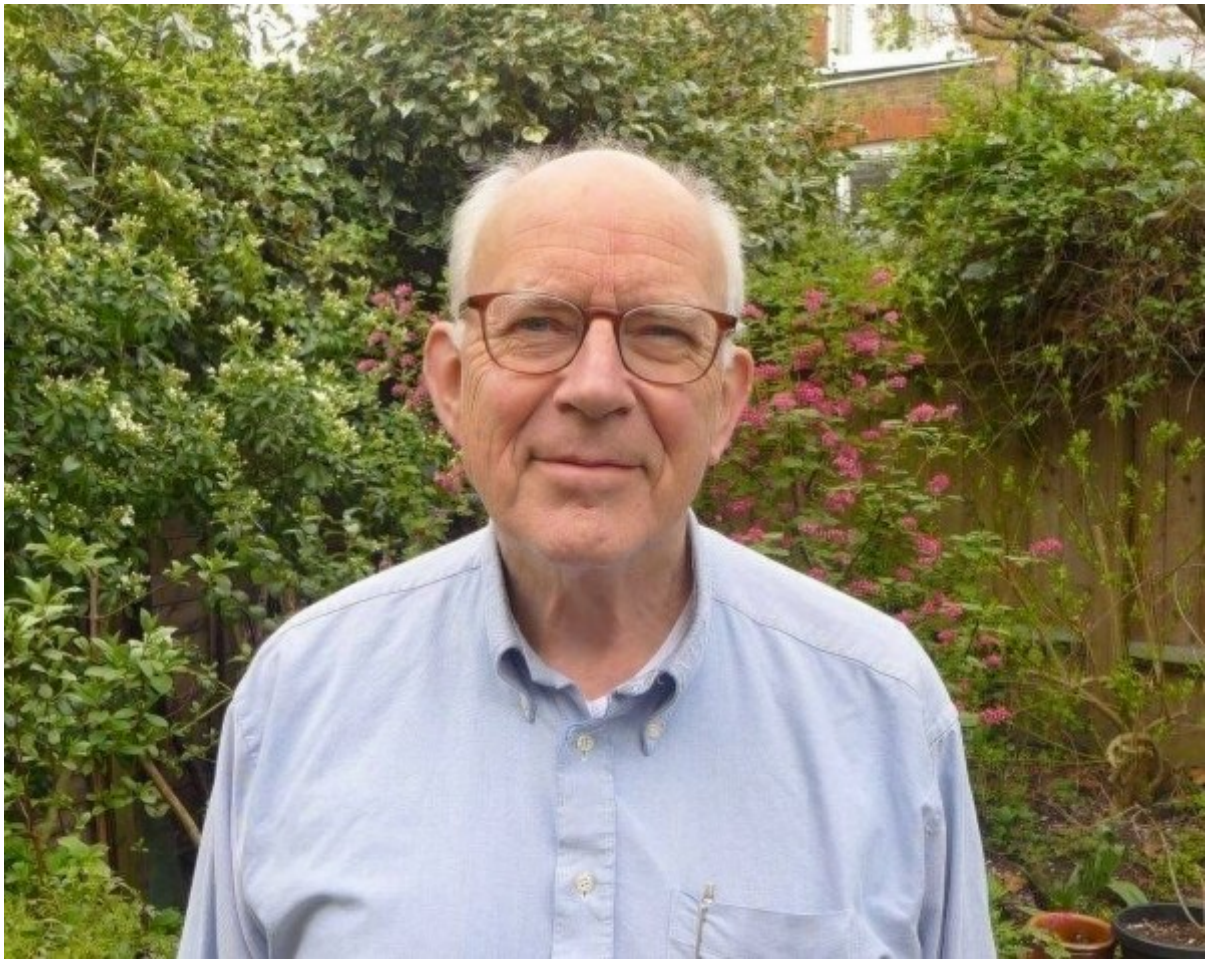
By introducing design archaeology as theory, method, and critique, Christina calls for a fundamental reassessment of how artefacts are analyzed, displayed, conserved, and taught in institutions of research, teaching, collection, and curation. She proposes that the concept of design should inform not just archaeological interpretation, but curatorial strategies and projects in heritage management.

Christina is not at all alone in promoting such an agenda. I certainly count myself one who is largely in agreement with the case she makes. She draws upon much support from many disciplinary fields. This adds to the strength of her argument. I hope it is clear from this brief forward that I see the distinctive and unique strength of the book to lie in the consummate skill and clarity of Christina's synthesis, the integration of so many matters of fundamental concern to contemporary archaeology. Few have achieved this.

By situating design as a multivalent practice – strategic, collaborative, time-traversing, materially reflexive – she enables an archaeology that is better attuned to both the complexity of ancient societies and the interpretive and pragmatic challenges of the present for the future. I suggest that design archaeology, in its polytemporality, its actuality, its past-present symmetry, is itself a process of design, making arguments and stories with archaeological sources, a speculative and creative process of building knowledge *with* the past, not just telling stories of what happened.

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# MIKE ROWLANDS 1944 – 2025



Another loss to anthropology and archaeology. Mike Rowlands died on July 19.

He was there at the funeral and at the tribute to Chris Tilley last November [Link] and I recalled first meeting him in 1979. It was at a conference about social theory that I helped organize with Keith Ray and Mark Gregson at St John's College Cambridge – his structural Marxist approach to prehistory was such a shaping scaffold for the development of social archaeology through the 80s and 90s.

I always admired his intellectual prowess, his inspirational Marxism, the impressively wide scope of his interests and expertise, covering archaeology, anthropology, material culture studies, heritage studies, social theory and the social sciences. Above all – the best of critical theory.



The memorial statement at the UCL website [Link] is quite a good summary of Mike's career. A more personal tribute comes from Francis B. Nyamnjoh, colleagues and collaborators in African Studies [Link].

Here's the statement from the UCL website.

Michael Rowlands was a leading figure in shaping the Department of Anthropology at UCL. As the inaugural member of what became the Material Culture section, he helped set its distinctive and globally influential intellectual agenda. Mike was UCL through and through, completing a BA in Anthropology (1966), followed by an

MPhil and PhD at UCL's Institute of Archaeology (1973). He was recruited immediately by M.G. Smith as a Lecturer, rising to Professor and serving as Head of Department (1992–1996). While his PhD focused on Bronze Age Europe, his subsequent anthropological research focused on Cameroon and other parts of West Africa, and, more recently, the study of heritage in China.

Mike was central to developing UCL Anthropology's signature broad-based approach. He uniquely reconfigured the relationships between archaeology, history, and anthropology, seeking to understand the contemporary world through the lens of long-term societal development. He actively grounded this vision in original research, conducting archaeological fieldwork (e.g. on ex-slave settlements in Brazil) alongside sustained ethnographic studies in Cameroon, demonstrating how each discipline enriches the others – an ethos that defines UCL Anthropology's distinctive profile. Our buoyant joint degree in Archaeology & Anthropology, which Mike co-founded alongside Chris Tilley, David Wengrow and others, is part of this legacy.

Mike was an integral member of an astonishing team of

West Africanists at UCL – including Mary Douglas, M.G. Smith and Phyllis Kaberry, among others – and co-founded the journal *Critique of Anthropology*. As its longstanding editor, he was known for arguing his views forcefully but always fraternally. Intellectually radical, he insisted ethnographic research must transcend the thick description of locality to engage with civilizational contexts and the longue durée. This approach is crystalised in his co-authored work with Stephan Feuchtwang, *Civilisation Recast* (2019). Collaboration was central to Mike's intellectual life, and he published extensively with major figures in global anthropology, including Jonathan Friedman, Peter Geschiere, Jean-Pierre Warnier, Stephan Feuchtwang, Francis Nyamnjoh, and Wang Mingming.

Mike was also a crucial presence in the ground-breaking work undertaken from the late-1990s onwards, across Anthropology and the Institute of Archaeology, that saw the synergies between material and visual culture, landscape studies and museum studies constellate into the formation of 'Heritage Studies'. This was a decisive turning point in the development of this area of research and teaching within UCL and globally. His

inspiration, thirst for knowledge and intellectual energy helped shape the MAs in Museum Ethnography and in Cultural Heritage Studies and galvanised the ever-popular course in Cultural Memory. Colleagues at the Institute of Archaeology, as well as generations of Masters' and PhD students, will continue to value and respect his significant insights, and his unerring ability to conjure up new, alternative and often unexpectedly brilliant perspectives on any and all topics under discussion.

Above all else, Mike was an intellectual. He epitomised the historical role of the university as the place where we seek a deeper understanding of our humanity and our world. Frequently, after lunch he would engage colleagues over fundamental issues about colonialism, civilization, materiality, and society, inspiring them and raising their capacity for intellectual engagement. His Marxism was not just politics, but rather an encompassing perspective on how political economies evolve over millennia through structural change, evident in key works like *The Evolution of Social Systems* (1978, co-edited with Friedman). Yet this intellectual ambition was always empirically anchored,

as landmark papers like “The Material Culture of Success” (1988) and “A Materialist Approach to Materiality” (2005) attest.

Mike’s abiding legacy is transforming material culture studies from a focus on objects into a profound philosophical exploration of the material basis of humanity itself. His charismatic personality and generous spirit will be remembered with great warmth and affection, and his intellectual influence will continue to radiate globally.

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# BINFORD – TELLING STORIES WITH THE PAST



The new book Creative Pragmatics for Active Learning in STEM Education (edited with Connie Svabo, Tamara Carleton, Chungfang Zhou) prompted a memory today.

The title indicates the collection is about STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) education. And so it is. But this is not a book about regular science education. We come at the topic by asking – Just what is science and how does it work? Our answers have a lot to do with creativity in the humanities and arts, as well as in the pragmatics of running scientific projects.

The book makes the case for pedagogy that unites competencies in arts, humanities and sciences through project-based problem-oriented learning – active learning-engaged-with-things. Not delivering bodies of knowledge, but processes, experiences of constant and iterative learning. We call the package creative pragmatics. Our argument is backed by research and case studies in student-centered active learning. We draw on sociology of knowledge, critical theory and science studies, insights into how science actually works to understand a complex contemporary world of uncertainty and precarity.

What is my particular angle on this? Building and sharing *archaeological* knowledge. What should archaeologists be doing – now and for the future? What role for science? What role for the humanities? And how to we share competencies in archaeological knowledge building with future generations of archaeologists.

The prompted memory. It was probably in 2002 that Lew Binford came to visit Bill Rathje and me in Stanford to discuss the question –

What is archaeology really about?

Lew gave a talk, met with students. We held a long discussion, recorded the key parts, transcribed them, and published an edited version in our book *Archaeology in the Making* (edited Bill Rathje, Chris Witmore and myself, 2013) [Link].

Some of those who shared the two days with us might have expected a confrontation around the character of science. Lew had long been identified as a leading figure in new and processual archaeology, since the 1960s caricatured as archaeology that follows the methodology of scientific inquiry, associated with the likes of hypothetico-deductive method. The same caricatured understanding of our discipline holds that my work is in a relativist anti-science post-processual paradigm.

In discussion it was Bill's pragmatism – his focus on getting archaeology done, adapting and managing with eclectic intellectual foraging, his capacity to seek bridges rather than divides – that meant we didn't feel the need to debate these abstractions and labels that had been applied to us – science and anti-science. Lew came straight to the point – the best archaeology, and, yes, let's call it science, is about constructing good cases, good arguments, good narratives.

Lew, Bill, and I agreed about the primacy of what can be called the *rhetoric* of science, with rhetoric conceived broadly as designIng and crafting arguments and cases. Skills and competencies, processes of crafting knowledge, material scaffolding for bodies of knowledge – these are the focus of the collection Creative Pragmatics.

Lew thought competency in constructing reasoned argument had been in decline since the 60s, such that the project of processual archaeology might be considered a failure. I have similar concerns about rhetorical competency in the humanities.

This common ground of archaeological argument and rhetoric is *between* the archaeological past and present.

A regular archaeological, and historiographical, concern is to narrate the past, to tell of what happened. What Lew and I shared in that conversation 20 years ago quite changes how we might conceive of such narrative –

## Archaeologists tell stories *with* the past, not *of* the past.



Lew Binford



Bill Rathje