

## CONTEMPORARY CHALLENGES OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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### **Abstract**

This article is an attempt to understand the ongoing processes of global archaeology during the last two decades. The aim of this article is to identify the most talked-about concepts of the recent period. The article is intended as a retrospective, subjective reflection from the viewpoint of Latvian archaeologist on the latest period of global historiography, seeking to answer the following question: What key concepts are trending in the global archaeological thought, and do they resonate in Latvian archaeology?

The author offers a critical view suggesting that the contemporary archaeological thought differs from the previous periods with pluralism, deep specialization and diversity of ideas as well as pronounced discursive radicalization in the form of unexpected criticism of capitalism in the Western intellectual world. The attempts to politicize the discipline is problematized.

In the end, it is concluded that the theoretical framework of Latvian archaeology is more conservative than contemporary global archaeology. Even if some new ideas are adapted, it is still not possible to talk about Latvian archaeologist as a public figure, a social or political activist.

**Keywords:** *Latvian and world archaeology, archaeological thought, current theoretical discussions, political activism, new challenges.*

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## Introduction

The 21<sup>st</sup> century officially began on 1 January 2001, and the 2020 can be considered as a milestone when we have spent two full decades in this century. This is a good point of reference, which allows some reflection on what is happening today. So far globally this century has been marked by significant economic growth, expanding consumer culture, technological development and the Fourth Industrial Revolution, a severe financial crisis, military conflicts, a migrant crisis and terrorism, mistrust of governments and traditional media, as well as the UK's withdrawal from the European Union and a global pandemic. The hottest debate in recent years has been the climate crisis, fuelled by global warming. At the same time, the 21<sup>st</sup> century is marked by a heightened attention to human rights in the public sphere, including issues related to gender and sexual minorities. These and many other challenges also play an important role in the development of scientific discourse.

In the global archaeological community, there are increasing calls for political activism and determined efforts to change paradigms and redefine the ontological foundations of archaeology. Such prominent communities as the World Archaeological Congress (WAC), European Association of Archaeologists (EEA) and the Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG) are increasingly highlighting the threats and challenges of today's world.

Here a small chronicle is outlined, indicating just some of the biggest events in politics, economics, and science on a global scale:

- 2001 – 9/11 – September 11 terrorist attacks;
- 2002 – introduction of the euro;
- 2003 – complete sequencing of the human genome;
- 2004 – Sumatra-Andaman earthquake – the strongest earthquake in our century;
- 2005 – a major milestone in the fight against global warming, the Kyoto Protocol was enacted;
- 2006 – *Twitter* launched;
- 2007 – the first *iPhones* released;
- 2008 – the global financial crisis (GFC) and recession;
- 2009 – the first African-American president of the United States – Barack Obama (1961) – was inaugurated;
- 2010 – Large Hadron Collider (LHC) achieved first results; the demonstrations and revolts called 'The Arab Spring' began;
- 2011 – emergence of digital cryptocurrencies such as *Bitcoin* and others;
- 2012 – discovery of Higgs boson;
- 2013 – *Euromaidan* demonstrations in Ukraine;
- 2014 – the largest Ebola Virus Disease (EVD) outbreak ever recorded;

- 2015 – peak of the European migrant crisis;
- 2016 – major terrorist attacks around the globe;
- 2017 – beginning of *Brexit* negotiations between the United Kingdom and the European Union;
- 2018 – the first private company – Space Exploration Technologies Corporation (*SpaceX*) launched an object into orbit around the Sun;
- 2019 – a series of international youth strikes and protests to demand immediate action on climate change – ‘Global Week for Future’;
- 2020 – worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.

It may seem to us that all this has nothing to do with archaeology or the research of prehistory, but it must be said that the archaeological community, especially in Europe, is actively following everything that is happening around the globe. All of these processes also have an impact on archaeological research.

### Can archaeologists change the world?

What we see in recent conferences and publications of WAC, EAA and TAG is a clear desire to be active, involved and, most interestingly, to attribute moral responsibility to the archaeological profession. In the call for EAA 2019 Annual Meeting in Bern, with the motto *Beyond Paradigms*, the President of the European Association of Archaeologists Felipe Criado-Boado (1960), mentioned that the active participation “(..) *is the most effective way we can keep Archaeology alive, socially relevant, culturally engaged and ready to contribute to the welfare of our societies* (..)” [Criado-Boado 2018b]. Thus, an archaeologist as a scientist is expected to be willing to contribute to the well-being of society not only to serve abstract scientific purposes.

Theoretical underpinnings of 21<sup>st</sup> century archaeology seems a bit confused about the various global challenges the world is facing. If the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is associated with the postmodern theory, the gloomy prospects of the future, the threat of relativism and the possible loss of archaeology in the crossfire between various political goals; then for a longer time now, as in other humanities, theorists are trying to find a new term to describe the current status quo. Many researchers consider postmodernism to be over. One of the most significant turning points in the Western world is certainly the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, which sparked a debate over the ‘death of the theory’ [Bintliff, Pearce 2011]. Some call this time ‘post-postmodern’ [Truong 2015].

Since 2008, archaeological milieu has begun to talk about an ontological turn towards post-humanist materialism. However, others would say that postmodernism is exactly what we are experiencing now – objective knowledge and truths are not expected from science, while diversity, pluralism, fragmentation of thought is being celebrated. There are researchers who do not see a new era, but a continuation of

modernity as late-, hyper- or super-modernity, late- or hyper- capitalism, post-industrialism, the information age or simply neo-modernism. Most acknowledge the sense of insecurity during this time, which is reflected in the inability to clearly define change. Something is changing, but no one really understands what exactly and what will be the result of it [Fahlander 2012].

Kristian Kristiansen has proposed that changes in archaeological thought should be seen as a paradigm shift influenced by the third scientific revolution – a significant increase in the Big Data and especially the DNA research offered by the STEM disciplines [Kristiansen 2014]. In the case of Latvian archaeology, the contribution of natural sciences has indeed been significant in light of the recent discoveries [e. g., Legzdīņa, Vasks et al. 2020]. Of course, we could argue with Kristiansen that this is not a revolution, but in fact a consistent, protracted and difficult path of research. This is not something that happened in one day, but more likely was attained gradually. Theoretically this approach is also grounded in the same old positivism and scientific optimism – the idea that simple accumulation of scientific data at some point in the foreseeable future will yield answers to some of the pre-selected ‘big questions’.

A common characteristic of our age is the growing prevalence of such questions as: *Can archaeologist contribute to the modern society and be an active agent in solving global problems? Can archaeologists help individuals and communities? Can archaeologists change the world?* This envisions a range of problems that ‘archaeological activism’ or ‘activist archaeology’ is concerned about. Their thesis is that with our professional knowledge we can make a significant contribution to society. However, it is not only about knowledge; economic benefits are also advertised, with archaeologists being able to attract money to communities by participating in development projects seeking to promote the local cultural heritage as a touristic asset [Gould 2018; McGuire 2008; Stottman 2010].

If we look deeper, the classical ideas of political Left permeate contemporary research quite noticeably. Criticism of capitalism and various variants of Marxism is playing an increasingly important role in academic society. It is weird how capitalism has become one of the main scapegoats to blame for problems in archaeology. From the Marxist point of view, the current archaeological practices are in many ways unethical [Hamilakis, Duke 2007].

This is a call to 9<sup>th</sup> World Archaeological Congress in Prague 2020 (due to pandemic postponed to 2022): “(..) *in reaction to the relentless expansion of hyper-capitalist economy-led globalization and the exacerbation of postcolonial problems, Archaeology with Capital A has been reorganizing itself by proactively ‘localizing’ itself into an increasing number of ‘archaeologies’ differentiated along issues concerning inequality, discrimination, injustices, destruction of cultural heritage and identities, and infringement of basic human rights generated by the deepening crisis (..)*” [Mizoguchi

2020]. Address by Congress President Koji Mizoguchi (1963) emphasizes the global crisis, by using an unusual phrase of Marxist Newspeak – globalization caused by the ‘hyper-capitalist’ economy, which is blamed for all the world’s problems and injustices.

The following was an invitation from the President of the EAA to the 2018 Congress in Barcelona: “(..) [Annual Meeting] *occurs at a time of worrying political developments in many European countries* (..). *When we celebrate the two hundredth birthday of Marx, it seems that many solid pillars melt into air.* (..) *I used to say that Archaeology is all about the future, because Archaeology is about the capacity to reflect on how the future came into existence.* (..) *Thus, when EAA faces its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the big question to be asked is: What Archaeology will do to mobilize a transformative understanding of our societies in times as complicated as these?* (..)” [Criado-Boado 2018a].

What are the conclusions? Allegedly, the whole discipline is celebrating Marx’s birthday and archaeology should be a visible socially significant force for changing the future. Surprisingly, Marx’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday confirmed the big difference in historical experience among EU member states, indicating how diametrically opposed attitudes towards one person can be and how the suffering of one can be a celebration for others. Indeed, President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker (1954) participated in celebrations along with the leader of communist China [Churm 2018]. Some EU members, questioning whether a person of such a rank as Juncker, representing all the member states, should have taken such a controversial decision [Tomašić 2018], however, harshly criticized this reverence to one of the founding fathers of a bygone totalitarian ideology.

The Estonian Institute of Historical Memory declared that “(..) *by participating in the festivities in Trier, Germany, celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of Karl Marx, the founding father of communism, the President of the European Commission is ignoring the fate of millions of victims of communism. The Communist Manifesto* (..) *became the political programme of the communist movement, prescribed violent class struggle and the subjection of all relations in society to total control.* (..) *We have no alternative but to see Karl Marx as bearing joint responsibility for the consequences of the ideology that he initiated, and not merely as a utopian philosopher. The participation of the President of the European Commission in Marx’s bicentenary festivities does not support a deeper mutual understanding among European peoples with differing historical experiences. This is a moral conflict* (..)” [Estonian Institute of Historical Memory 2018].

The fact is that if archaeologists want to get involved in politics, they must also take into account political opponents and diversity of opinion. The old misunderstanding that communism brings friendship, peace and harmony between

peoples unfortunately does not convince those whose empirical experience shows otherwise.

The case of *Brexit* was an interesting example of how politically active modern archaeology is trying to be. An emergency session was even convened during the EAA Annual Meeting in Vilnius in 2016 [Criado-Boado 2016], and all future archaeological congresses and conferences by now are already discussing the prehistoric contexts of *Brexit* [Gardner, Harrison 2017]. Archaeologists are actively involved in blaming ethno- and neo- nationalism, the post-truth era, demonizing certain unreliable or less educated groups in society with whom scientists no longer want anything in common. Often this kind of theoretical approach to archaeology and history leads to the same style *argumentum ad passiones* or even *ad hominem* as it was initially supposed to condemn. It must be said, however, that such uncritical tossing of neologisms as insults leads to an unnecessary polarization of society. If there is a post-truth age now, then it must be admitted that there once was an age of truth [Golubevs 2019]. If some pieces of news are fake, then others can never be wrong. If someone has obtained the title of scientist, the person is free from biases and so on.

Although there are calls for political engagement and civic participation, such initiatives create a closed bubble. The so called 'mainstream' media are so afraid of liars, populists, racists and chauvinists that to avoid misconceptions we pretend they do not exist at all, sacrificing a balanced diversity of views in the name of truth [Volka 2016]. The same pattern evolves in archaeological community. Theoretical discussions tend to ignore the thoughts and needs of the 'uneducated' majority of society, thus avoiding the social reality. By moving away from the public which shares nationalist, conservative, or even centrist political sentiments, archaeologists run the risk of becoming irrelevant to a very large section of society, all of which are uncritically classified as populists.

### The key concepts

Historiographical survey shows that the period considered in this article in general can be distinguished by the radicalization of opinions and criticism of capitalism conducted by the Western intelligentsia. Under the influence of young left-wing scholars, academia calls for a revolution in thought, thus usurping the role of guardians of morality and truth. Archaeology as a science that works with material evidence of history is very suitable for playing out such narratives.

Relatively recently, such an interesting idea as '**anarchist**' archaeology has entered the academic environment. With claims that archaeology itself uses patriarchal, hierarchic praxis and promotes alienation of labour, many scholars call for a radical reorganization of the discipline, abandonment of authorities, as well as fighting the

Nazis [Borck, Sanger 2017; Eddisford, Morgan 2018; Morgan 2019]. However, their ideas are not clear yet; neither has it been comprehensible who those Nazis are.

So far, such ideas have not been found in Latvia. Some research shows that the Latvian archaeological system is very stable and highly academic, as well as equal in terms of gender structure [Šnē, Vijups, Mintauris 2014: 14; 29]. Although some researchers have recently increased their public engagement, the authority of the archaeologists is not in doubt.

Modern archaeological thought is a visible witness of its time. The **global economic crisis** did hit hard archaeology as a discipline, so the theme of crisis entered academic discussions as well. For example – *Archaeology and the Global Economic Crisis: multiple impacts, possible solution* [Schlanger, Aitchison 2010] and many others [see, for example, Driessen, Cunningham 2017; van der Wilt, Martínez Jiménez, Petruccioli 2013].

Although Latvian archaeologists did experience the effects of the crisis in their daily lives, this was not reflected in the research, but instead they felt a heightened moral responsibility for their work, and in 2009 the Latvian Society of Archaeologists (*Latvijas Arheologu biedrība*) was founded, which also helped to solve some financial problems [Urtāns, Virse 2010: 6].

One of the biggest topics of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in public sphere and archaeology is **climate change**, global warming and related issues. Many researchers are raising awareness about endangered heritage, especially along coastlines where rising water levels impact archaeological monuments [Dawson, Nimura, López-Romero, Daire 2017]. There are researchers who do see a path for archaeology here to become actually relevant by helping modern communities to build the resilience against the effects of climate change [van de Noort 2013]. To put it simply – archaeology can provide stories relating experiences of the past, which gives an opportunity to learn from mistakes and success of our predecessors. “(..) *In archaeology, sustainability has traditionally connoted people living sustainably in the past. While adaptive and resilient groups lived sustainably within the carrying capacity of their environments, unsustainable groups, less adaptive and with lower resilience, exceeded their environmental capacities* (..)” [Hutchings, La Salle 2019: 1653].

Such recurring buzzwords as ‘**sustainability**’ and ‘**resilience**’ have become a must-have almost in every archaeological project. In addition, many authors try to exploit these terms as much as possible. In archaeology, it seems to be limited to instructions on how to accept and overcome the loss – by building the resilience [Chiu, Tsang 2013; Hutchings, La Salle 2019].

However, recently there have been noticeable attempts to make a better use of this word. For instance, Guttman-Bond [2019] has tried to look harder for those positive experiences of the past and make us believe that perhaps archaeology can

really save the planet by reinventing ingeniously simple but long-lost ideas. Of course, another question is how much influence archaeologists do really have on global politics. Are our ideas heard? Do our big budget projects still rather not limit themselves with empty phrases that conform to some prevailing mood?

One of the strangest terms we find in modern archaeology is ‘**anthropocene**’. Numerous publications, reports, research groups that have exploited this term are continuously produced [Meharry, Haboucha, Comer 2017; McCorrison, Field 2019; Resilience in East African Landscapes 2019].

However, if we delve deeper, we discover that the use of such a word is not scientifically justified. The fact that the media and social networks talk about something does not make it a scientific concept. The Anthropocene chronology also varies from the 50s of 20<sup>th</sup> century up to the time of hominids as a reference point. If this term refers to a stratigraphic layer, then in theory we should rename the cultural layer as such to “Anthropocene”. Some archaeologists have already pointed to the unjustified use of the term, but there are many who use it uncritically in varying contexts [Woodfill 2019].

Currently there is very little research related to prehistoric climate and ecology in Latvia. In-depth research on these topics has been carried out by members of other disciplines, but not by archaeologists themselves [e. g., Steinberga, Stivrins 2021; Zunde 2016].

Problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century also extend to areas such as archaeological research on **violence**. Research on conflict and military violence coincide with current manifestations of armed violence around the world [see, for example, Ralph 2013; González-Ruibal, Moshenska 2015; Fernández-Götz, Roymans 2017]. Conflict and violence permeate human history, but the highlighting of specific topics in particular historical circumstances marks a certain pattern. This reveals to us the therapeutic endeavours of archaeological research. Researchers are witnesses of their time and, unable to come to terms with what is happening around them, look for answers in the past.

Interestingly, with the wider use of the term ‘**globalization**’ in our century, what was at the beginning related to more economic strategies [Moody-Stuart 2002], a ‘pre-historic globalization’ also appeared [Vandkilde 2007; Jennings 2011; Hodos 2017].

However, obviously linked to the migrant crisis, past **migration** is now being studied very extensively. There are calls to abandon the myths created by nation states about the continuous population and borders of the territory. Instead, various influential institutions choose the theory of constant migration and cultural openness as the main research direction [Sanchez-Mazas, Blench, Ross, Peiros, Lin 2008; de Ligt, Tacoma 2016; Naum, Ekengren 2018; Gatto, Mattingly, Ray, Sterry 2019].

Responding to the timeliness of the subject, Latvian researchers in 2019 also published an interdisciplinary study on cultural migrations in the territory of Latvia



in various historical periods and contexts [Rožkalne 2019]. The study emphasizes the multi-ethnic composition of the Latvian population and intensive processes of cultural migration. At the same time, the editor does not hide that the international, political trendiness of migration research is related to the 2014–2015 migrant crisis [Kūlis 2019: 12]. The chapters related to archaeology highlight the tangible friction between the ‘nationalistic’ view of monolithic Latvian collective identity and Latvians as the main subject of research, as opposed to the idea of this area as a crossroads [Zemītis 2019: 352–353]. The chapter on demographic processes in the Stone Age [Zariņa 2019] generally deals only very conditionally with the topic of migration. Andrejs Vasks’ article on migration in Latvia’s prehistory also does not offer any revolutionary perspective on this issue, emphasizing the hypothetical nature of various theories about ethnic processes and the origin of ethno-cultural groups in this area [Vasks 2019]. Overall, this multidisciplinary monograph lacks authenticity, leaving an impression of vague and stilted attempt to ‘sign up’ under a foreign imposed narrative.

Since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, archaeologists cannot find a unified conceptual language in relation to migrationism or diffusionism as causes for cultural change. Kristiansen today is sure that even though some processualists for a while had tried to deny prehistoric mobility, migrations are the real historical fact, “(..) *We knew that already without hard sciences (..)*” [Kristiansen 2014: 42]. He says that, “(..) *mobility paradigm is very much in tune with both the ideology of global capitalism and the lives of cosmopolitan academics. There is nothing strange, therefore, in archaeologists finding mobility in Prehistory today. In fact, they found it before (..)*” [Kristiansen 2014: 43]. However, can something really be a hard fact in our field, if each subsequent ideology and even the subjective experience of the researcher is able to change it in the direction of a radically opposite explanation?

The archaeological thought of the 21<sup>st</sup> century so far is characterized by pluralism, deep specialization and diversity. In addition, such grand theories as processualism or post-processualism and the polarization between academics seems to be forgotten. More and more we borrow ideas and approaches from social sciences, anthropology and other disciplines [Lucas 2015]. At the same time, history of science and source criticism indicate that many studies of contemporary theoretical archaeology can be criticized for a distinctly anachronistic approach, possibly even unscientific and unreasonably emotional engagement with popular topics. The role of the new, digital individualism, self-centeredness, is certainly still completely incomprehensible in the theory of archaeology. An essential feature of this era is the fact that contemporary problems and the study of one’s personal political or social views seem to scholars more relevant than attempts to approach the objective truth of the past.

*“(..) Perspectives that argue that we should use the empirical evidence to develop new theories implicitly assume that our aim as archaeologists is to uncover the past, when it seems to me that the whole point of the discipline is to provide us with ways of thinking through troublesome issues in the present – whether those are climatic change, temporality, or gendered identity (..)” [Brück 2015: 34].*

Today few are interested in belonging to processualist or post-processualist school, much more focusing on specific topics – the environment, postcolonialism, gender, feminism etc. [see Bacus 1993; Linduff, Sun 2004; Koch, Kirleis 2019]. We can ask a provocative question along the lines of scientific ethics regarding a conflict of interest. How objective will the study be if a female scientist chooses feministic research approach? Does the desire to romanticize some oppressed societal groups, such as slaves, provide a true account of history? It still cannot be excluded that the researcher might select and highlight the facts he or she likes, concealing ideological inconveniences.

### Conclusions

We can conclude that significant new ideas in archaeology have not appeared during these last two decades. At some point, everything has been already discussed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In any case, we are seeing constant efforts of archaeology to keep up with the times and to sacrifice a certain amount of scientific credibility to discuss ideological problems.

Archaeologist is now expected to become a publicly engaged figure. Kristiansen declares that he *“(..) do not recommend a return to a Romantic past where the polymath and antiquarian was a central figure (..) we need to find new forms of such engagements, from blogging to online histories that are revised and expanded on a daily basis. It can take the form of national histories, European histories or gender histories, immigration histories etc. The sky is the limit. But this would also demand a revision of the role of the historian/archaeologist/intellectual as a publicly engaged figure, and a redirection of funding towards new forms of public engagements (..) we need to explore in a scientific way the many new possibilities of engaging with the past in the present (..)” [Kristiansen 2014: 27].*

As for Latvian archaeology, it seems that these 20 years have passed in a different mood. Looking back at what was written during the 2000s, there still is a very slow transition from the Soviet system and ideas about how to do archaeology. Comparing the national discourse of Latvian history and archaeology with the tendencies of European archaeology, a feeling of disconnection sometimes arises. Perhaps they are not just separate lines of thought; perhaps the scientific schools we represent are different already at the basic level of values and ideals, although EAA president has written: *“(..) Having experienced the changing notion of what it is to be ‘European’*

*through the 25 years of the EAA, it is perhaps the moment to remember that Europe represents, first and last, an inclusive conciliation of individual liberal ideals and solidarity in terms of community values, something that exemplifies well the North and South, the East and West traditions (...) placed somewhere within the Far East and the Far West, this is the best contribution that Europe can offer to the World (..)* [Criado-Boado 2019].

Nevertheless, so far with few exceptions, the activities of our scientists are more related to pragmatic research, scientific processing and classification of archaeological material accumulated in archives over many years. The most significant breakthrough is the tendency to look for an interdisciplinary approach and new methods, such as the application of geospatial information analysis; also, the situation in Radiocarbon dating slowly starts to improve.

Many young researchers are looking towards archaeometry. However, the so-called Big Data is only gradually entering our research. This will, of course, lead to thinking about archiving and interpretation methods, the capacity of human resources and institutions to store and process the information collected. In the field of theory, Latvian archaeology is definitely conservative. There is no comparative material, no monographs in relation to global trending topics. Even if some current ideas are adapted, then by no means can we talk about archaeologist as a public figure, social or political activist. We do not really have such a tradition. The community of archaeologists and the professional Latvian Society of Archaeologists are not in a hurry to get involved in any political discussions and declarative statements, as we see in many other parts of the world. A positivist and empirical approach to science can be seen in most current Latvian research. Does this mean that we have not yet reached the self-reflective stage of science? Do we, perhaps still have our own alternative view about the meaning of archaeological practice? In the long run, however, it cannot be ruled out that the trends we see in the world will reach us as well, because there will simply be issues that supranational institutions will lobby through projects via the flow of funding. Let us hope that this will not be an obstacle to maintaining high scientific standards, national academic traditions and critical thinking.

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