An interview with Michael Shanks

Douglass W. BAILEY[*]

Michael Shanks is the Omar and Althea Hoskins Professor of Classics at Stanford University in California and Co-Director of the Stanford Humanities Lab.[1] Michael joined Stanford in 1998 following his position as Head of the Department of Archaeology at the University of Wales at Lampeter; he took his PhD from Cambridge in 1992. Among his many publications were the ground-breaking volumes written with Chris Tilley, *Re-constructing Archaeology* and *Social Theory in Archaeology*, both published in 1987. Other major works include *Theatre/Archaeology* (with Mike Pearson; 2001), *Art and the Early Greek State* (1999), *Classical Archaeology of Greece* (1996), *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past* (1995), and *Experiencing the Past* (1992). A more complete list of recent and earlier work can be found on Michael's extraordinary website: http://metamedia.stanford.edu/projects/MichaelShanks/Home.

Douglass Bailey: If someone asks you what an archaeologist does, what would you say?

Michael Shanks: I would say that an archaeologist works on what is left of the past, and explores what might be done with the past in the present.

DWB: So what should archaeologists be doing, especially if they were working in a non-western tradition, for example in small regional museums?

MS: We all have local conditions, and we can all learn from each other. The opportunities for international exchange of ideas for international alliance are better than ever they have been. The learning process is easier than ever, though that is not to say that it is easy. I am very interested in exploring the potential of new media for developing precisely this kind of exchange.

DWB: You have created an archaeological lab for media at Stanford. What is this all about?

MS: Why an archaeological lab devoted to new media? You can find lab's mission statement on the web.[2] Basically, archaeologists don't discover the past; they work on what is left of the past. This involves processes of transformation (or translation) often into media. So imaging, writing, documentation, publication are at the heart of archaeology. New media are throwing light on old analog media. New media are so fast-changing and so centred on fungibility (i.e., equivalence across what were once quite separate media: a picture can be a movie still, a poster, an iChat illustration, an iPod event, a PPT presentation...), that these new media are posing some old, old questions of documentation with renewed force. It is crucial for archaeologists to ask, how do we represent the past? Furthermore, archaeologists, with their focus on materiality, have a unique perspective for those interested in media/documentation. For example I run a class on all this called archaeography.[3]

"We are all archaeologists now" - there is an archaeological sensibility at the heart of modernity. We have long known the connection between archaeology / collection / museology and contemporary cultural identity. Here is a way of working on just that without rehearsing again the important, though well-worn, themes of nationalism and identity. The second crucial reason for connecting archaeology with new media is their fundamental bases in database design, structure, and management.

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[*] Douglass W. Bailey is Professor in European Prehistory at Cardiff University, Cardiff School of History and Archaeology, Humanities Building, Column Drive, Cardiff CF10 3EU, United Kingdom, baileydw@cardiff.ac.uk
[1] For more information about Stanford and the Humanities Lab see http://stanford.edu and http://shl.stanford.edu/
[2] http://metamedia.stanford.edu/projects/Metamedia/mission
[3] http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/projects/MichaelShanks/945.

You may ask whether or not there were any boundaries in this vision. The boundaries relate to those of the discipline, orthodoxy and how we negotiate it (i.e., the "politics of discourse"). And yes, this is precisely to do with the radical insight that archaeologists WORK on what is left of the past, to MAKE all sorts of things (in discursive structures): things like papers, books, narratives, exhibitions, classes, web sites, museums, collections. So the boundaries are to do with our savviness, and our tactical and strategic goals with respect to the currency of the past in the present.

DWB: You started thinking publicly in this way with your 1992 book *Experiencing the Past*?

MS: I thought it was there in the earlier stuff, but yes I was explicit about archaeological discourse and its connections with modern/modernist sensibilities and identities, explicit about archaeology as cultural production, explicit about an ethical imperative (as I see it) to take responsibility for what we do and say of the past, explicit about the contemporaneity of the past. It matters because it is here and now.

DWB: Where did all of this come from? What was going on in the Archaeology Department at Cambridge when you were there?

MS: Chris Tilley and I shared a disappointment with archaeology when we were at Cambridge in the late 1970s and 1980s. How could archaeology be serious about reconstructing (past) societies on the basis of material remains, when there was so little critical insight into the way society, culture and material goods work with and against people. We wanted archaeologists to engage in serious social science and humanities research on the basis of a good conceptual tool kit. Our books *Re-constructing Archaeology* and *Social Theory in Archaeology* (Shanks and Tilley 1987a, 1987b) were written to that end: to build a tool kit for thoughtful archaeology. Other people called this theory. From the beginning, we were both primarily engaged in empirical archaeology, though yes, the gatekeepers did their best to keep us out: "This is abstract theory and not real archaeology"; "This is irrelevant"; "We did all this 10 years ago"; "You are just like every graduate student - angry and wanting to build a career"; "We did all this but had the good manners to keep quiet and not publish it"; "We are already doing all this"; "Oh, it is alright for you, you come from an elite University (or school)". In fact, these are comments made to me about what I had to say about new media after a seminar I gave last month in northern Europe!

It is an old, recognized, and common experience of paradigms (in Kuhn's sense), as well as a crucial point, that debate in academia is not wholly about winning arguments and persuading people (often not even minimally). It is also a point about the importance of patronage and intellectual communities. Academic debate is not about these things, rather it is about careers and cliques, telling stories about oneself and one's community (or how one sees oneself), posturing and identity. The concept of performativity is so relevant here: it's not what you say but the way you say it. Acting/doing makes you who you are. None of this is to say that there is not great integrity and value in the academy as well, just that we should be savvy about what goes on and why. This is one of the reasons why I came to the United States.

DWB: You are now the Hoskins Professor of Classics at Stanford University. Why did you move from the UK to the US?

MS: Changes in the European academy mean that better opportunities for thoughtful archaeology (as I have defined it) appear, currently, in the US. It is also, of course about resources.

DWB: Is it also about where archaeology has its home in the US: in universities and in Cultural and Social Anthropology departments?

MS: This is an interesting question - where does archaeology rest easy? Because archaeology has always found its main home outside of the academy, this brings up a question I think most important - the role of academic writing/production. And this is a reason why I use the word academy rather than university. For me it was a matter of the role of the academy (and by that I mean to include not just the institution of university, but the role of the intellectual/academic in research, pedagogy and publication). I want, *a priori*, to connect the academic and the professional. I am very attached to the notion of the public sphere.

Again, this is why I emphasize academic production. One route opening up for many is that of digital representation: representation taking in publication and also 'citizenship' (political affiliation, mobilization, representation old issues) thrown into relief by digital media. Many examples are possible here. We are running a workshop in digital citizenship later in the year looking at the bottom-up organization of ideas and publication and the perceived threats of all this: DRM, IP, Creative Commons and monopoly control, even terrorist threats.

DWB: What was the reaction in 1987 when the two books that you wrote with Chris Tilley appeared?

MS: The response was not very pleasant or encouraging. We managed to break into academic publishing (from the outside as it were). Chris had a Post-doctoral Fellowship at Cambridge at the time, and I was an independent, living in the northeast of England, teaching Classical Languages in a high school. The response to the books was vitriolic. Most people were horrified that they had been published. Really, they were very unpleasantly honest about telling us what they thought. Cambridge University Press (CUP) published one of the books (Polity Press the other); Colin Renfrew was a series editor for CUP and he recommended the book to the archaeology editor. Renfrew never challenged us and there was an understandable attitude among publishers that any publicity is good publicity.

Few criticized our scholarship. Instead they found fault because we mingled science with politics and business. We argued that archaeology is primarily about our relationship with the past. Archaeology is not about the past so much as where we come from. This makes it ethically and politically important to people, because the past is often where we look for roots and a sense of self and identity. Here we were connecting archaeology with the growing heritage industry and arguing that archaeological scientists do not have an overriding claim on the past. Archaeology is just another part of a growing interest in the material past that also includes commercial, state, and personal interests in tourism and collection, for example. It is a powerful claim to want to build scientific knowledge of the past, but not one to be pursued to the exclusion of other interests. In arguing that archaeologists should take seriously their responsibilities to contemporary society, we were seen as political pundits rather than disinterested scientists. But we were proved to be spot-on in our diagnosis of archaeology. Since the 1980s, legislation has been introduced around the world to ensure respect for plural and different interests in the past. In the United States, for example, Native American spiritual claims on the remains of the past now have to be respected. Heritage is seen as a human right. Cultural tourism, focusing on collections and archaeological sites, has become a massive economic sector. We were laying the intellectual ground for understanding these changes.

People found fault because we went against anthropological orthodoxy. We criticized ideas of cultural evolution (i.e., that history is a progression of social forms that evolve through evolutionary processes such as adaptation to environment). This has been the main anthropological view of human history for two centuries. Instead, we built our ideas on a broader base of social theory and philosophy. The result, only achieved after some twenty years of further

research, is a picture of the main events in human history which is quite different from the old orthodoxy[4].

People found fault with us because we proposed another, more historical, model of the past that includes intangibles like the way people think. In place of orthodox cultural evolution we developed what I call an archaeology of mind that sees a major role in long-term history for cultural factors such as spirituality, ritual, cult, ideology, and senses of identity, while nevertheless emphasizing, as an archaeology, the importance of people's relationships with things. This actually amounts to a different model of human nature.

They found fault because we argued for a new interdisciplinary field centred upon material culture and design. We argued that what people do with things often tells you more than what people say. Nobody had noticed that beer cans were different in Sweden and the United Kingdom; and that they *had* to be different. We connected beer can design with all kinds of attitudes towards alcohol in the UK and Sweden in the 1980s, and even came up with an explanation for why the colours of cans, and what is written on them, differ in the two countries. Studying the cans led us into unspoken assumptions about two very different cultures of drink. But the argument was much bigger: that, in spite of our contemporary obsession with goods, there was actually no discipline that dealt with understanding things. Twenty years later we have design studies, material culture studies, cognitive science, HCI (human-computer interaction), and even garbology (archaeologists digging up land-fill sites in order to understand contemporary society).

DWB: What is your new book about?

MS: The *Origins* book still has no final title. It is a project to take the long-term view. Something only archaeologists can do: take the long-term view on things that matter to us now, like social innovation and change, like core human values (where they come from and how they have evolved), like life in cities, like empire and power. Archaeologists have been so reluctant to deal with such questions (though there have been notable and brave exceptions). I think it is our duty, as critical academics, to attempt to address these issues. Thus, we clearly see now that farming is less an economic change than something to do with architecture, home and the domestic, relations with other species, and spirituality. The economic impact came later than did the significant changes - villages, shrines, inter-species affiliations.

DWB: What advice would you give to archaeologists (or "cultural producers", to use your phrase) who want to make a difference in the ways that their disciplines work?

MS: I would suggest some tactics.

1) Solidarity and loyalty. Six people sticking together can bring about colossal change.

2) Be inclusive by default. Let others exclude themselves from what it is you are doing.

3) Don't call it theory. That can sound exclusive. Instead, call it "thoughtful archaeology" because everyone wants to be thoughtful.

4) Don't expect rational and reasoned debate. This is not what the university is about. Old ideas are won over not by strength of argument but because of far simpler reasons; their champions are out-manoeuvred or simply retire and die.

5) Lower your expectations. Acknowledge the ubiquity of "The 20% Rule": 20% of the people will hate what you do regardless of what you say; 20% percent of the people will love

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[4] And this is the subject of my new book tentatively titled *Origins*: how new archaeological thinking is changing the way we understand history.

what you do regardless of what you say; and the remaining 60% won't care or have an opinion about what you say.

6) Stand by some radical old values, such as the intimate relationship of research, pedagogy and publication, values such as those of reason, and old values such as collegiality (i.e., open minded affiliation and freedom of speech). Be more scientific than the scientists. This is at the core of the Archaeology Media Lab here at Stanford: doing as thinking, thoughtful practice as research. Hence the proper / best meaning of "lab": a place where you work.

7) Be humble. We only ever come to realize how little we know. I am much more comfortable now in saying that I write, teach, and have some questions I think are wonderful to explore.

DWB: Can we talk about the work that you are doing now in the north of England and also the work that you did in the 1990s in Wales with Mike Pearson (Department of Theatre, Film and Television Studies, University of Wales at Aberystwyth)?

MS: Archaeologists deal in certain relationships with place, senses of place and belonging, and the presence of the past in particular locales, and cultural ecologies that interweave different facets of people's inhabitation of the land. Landscape archaeology has grown out of historical geography and environmental archaeology as part of an interest in dealing with such an archaeological theme (or sensibility). I have been concerned that this is somewhat narrow and uncritical. For example, most landscape archaeology is quite (blissfully) ignorant of the way the notion of 'landscape' has developed from its origins in a northern European attitude towards property and development, the attitude that found a connection with an aesthetic of place, and one that involves certain 'performative' relationships with place and space. The aesthetic critique and performative component of landscape archaeology is one reason why I found working with Mike Pearson so fruitful. It has led to a series of works that seek a way of dealing with (archaeological) places that is rigorously empirical, founded in critique (i.e., that is aware of ideology), and that is centred upon a temporality that recognizes the contemporary nature of the past, that recognizes that land (or place and, thus, distinct from geometric space) is a sorting device, that recognises land/place as involving a folded temporality that cuts through time's arrow (past through to present).

One current topic of mine is to understand our archaeological sensibility of place in relation to this cultural genealogy, in relation to the seventeenth and eighteenth century genre of 'landscape', and also in relation to those other genres concurrent with rationalization and modernity from the seventeenth century on the topographic tradition (and its descendence through to contemporary human geography). Into this fits chorography: an old genre of descriptive topography that subsumed geography, archaeology, mapping, travel writing, place-name study, and natural history. Mike Pearson has just completed a chorography of Lincolnshire. I am exploring central Greece (where I have worked for twenty years) and now the borders of Scotland/England - one of the best researched 'landscapes' in archaeology anywhere. Mike and I call all this 'deep mapping'.

Deep mapping is an old tradition in European Antiquarianism of "writing on the land". Deep mapping refers to the temporal and historiographical character of chorography. It reflects eighteenth century Antiquarian approaches to place, which included history, folklore, natural history and hearsay. The deep map attempts to record and represent the grain and patina of place through juxtapositions and interpenetrations of the historical and the contemporary, the political and the poetic, the discursive and the sensual; the conflation of oral testimony, anthology, memoir, biography, natural history and everything you might ever want to say about a place (see more in Pearson and Shanks 2001: 64-5)

And, I am now discovering, that it goes back to the post-Renaissance consolidation of scholarly interest in history and geography as well as to the definition of the emerging nation

states of northern Europe. Crucially, thinking in these ways maintains our reflexive and critical awareness of the deep history of contemporary issues in archaeology. Here I am explicitly concerned with an intellectual tradition / genealogy that takes us to those times when our orthodox disciplinary divisions did not hold, times in the earlier moments of European rationalization, when the antiquarian was a polymath, able to range freely in a heretical empirics. I am finding that a methodology that is rigorously empirical and attentive to cultural ecology (i.e., a heretical empirics) appears quite orthodox and scholarly (it has to be), and yet it radically undermines the (meta) narratives that have conditioned our regional and national archaeological accounts since the nineteenth century and before.

DWB: A final question. Are you familiar with the BBC's programme *Desert Island Discs*, in which interviewees are asked to select music, books and a luxury that they would take with them if they were marooned on their own on a desert island? What would you take?

MS: I know that this sounds so conventional, but I would take the works of Shakespeare. I am just now realizing their scope and am fascinated by the English Renaissance. Or I would take Aeschylus or Borges or Levi-Strauss' *Tristes Tropiques*, but not *Harry Potter* (I have just been reading *Harry Potter* at length with our daughter Molly). Luxury? No question: whisky, or a lifetime's supply of California's best Napa Valley wines. Or perhaps a Leica MP camera with a 50 mm Noctilux lens and a supply of Fuji film (colour transparency and 100ASA black and white) and a darkroom.

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