

Dig It Dialogue

Cross Boundaries and Remain Questioning: An interview with Ian Hodder

This is an interview between Dig It editor, Jana Rogasch, and Professor Ian Hodder from Stanford University in California.

Jana: *Dig It* is a journal by and for early career archaeologists. The contributors and readers are all (hopefully) preparing for a long career in archaeology. We are eager to hear from you, who already had a long research career, how it might feel to look back on 40 or more years of archaeological practice.

When I read my coursework essays or my Bachelor thesis that I wrote only 4 years ago, I regularly flinch and never want to look at them again. Reading your own publication from 30 or so years ago – how does that feel?

Ian: Well actually my first two publications were in 1971, which is 43 years ago. Blimey, is that right? Scarily long period of time. I guess it is not surprising that one's feelings about what one wrote ages ago change. But in fact I have found two stages of dismay. In the first phase, similar to what you experience, I feel embarrassed soon after writing. I don't like reading what I have recently written – it always seems very naïve and inadequate, and I can see all the flaws and short-cuts that I took. My ideas move on quickly and so looking back at recent writing it seems provisional and incomplete. Then gradually over time one looks back with a better perspective and I can see that what I wrote, incomplete and inadequate as it was, at least had a place in its own time. With hindsight one can see that some article or book fit into its period and had its place, even if flawed. But then the second stage of dismay cuts in when I realise that the whole perspective that I was fitting into was rather a dead end. For example, in 'The Domestication of Europe' I followed approaches influenced by structuralism. In the end that wider approach has not had much impact in archaeology and it was perhaps a failing of mine to take it so seriously. But then, or so my internal dialogue goes, perhaps it was necessary for someone to experiment with structuralism, so that the discipline could move on beyond it. So maybe there was a value in the book after all. (So maybe after the first two stages of dismay there is a kind of grudging acceptance!)

As you can see, one can go round and round on these issues. In the end I think the most important point is that to be critical of and flinch at one's earlier writings is a good thing. It shows you are being thoughtful, critical and continuing to grow. This is also relevant to my next answer.

Jana: One's opinion and approach towards things of course changes over the years and decades. But as an active researcher, this is all displayed publically through publications. How do you yourself feel about 'changing your mind' and what reactions to it did you get over the years from people reading your work?

Ian: As I have just said, I think it is important to keep asking questions, challenging yourself and moving on. What is the earthly point of being an academic if one doesn't keep questioning, exploring, finding new answers, pushing the boundaries of knowledge (and all those other clichés of an intellectual life)? It has always angered me when people have criticised me for changing my mind. I would hate to be sitting here, writing this, with the same ideas I had 43 years ago! That does not give the impression of a searching, enquiring mind. Of course, there is

the danger that one moves on too quickly, after only superficial engagement with the issues. And I suppose criticisms of my changing my mind were suggesting that I was too superficial, not dealing with things in their complexity and depth.

That is not the way I experienced things. When I was doing quantitative spatial analysis in the 1970s, I explored that in great depth and in many ways and from many angles. But through that process I felt that I came to see clearly the limitations of that approach and those techniques. So I moved on because I couldn't, using those techniques and approaches, answer the questions that interested me. And generally through my career I have tried, however inadequately, to do things deeply and with substance. I think that my long commitment to a large-scale field project at Çatalhöyük in Turkey is another example of that. So I do think that changing one's mind is a positive thing, but I also advise students that they need to engage in projects, data, ideas, philosophies deeply and in a sustained way.

Jana: Has teaching archaeological theory influenced your thinking about theory? Is it difficult to teach theory? At what level in their studies do you think students should be exposed to archaeological theory?

Ian: I'm all for teaching theory at all levels. I take the view that the process by which archaeologists make sense of the past is very complex, and ridden with theory, even if we say or pretend that it isn't. Even a simple statement that 'this ditch is defensive' is drenched in theory, as Collingwood showed. Even descriptive statements such as 'this pit is 1.56 m deep' depends on theoretical understanding and on theoretical claims (about the term 'pit' for example). It seems important to me that students are exposed to these issues very early on. I remember as a second year undergraduate I participated in a training excavation in the Outer Hebrides. There were mounds of shells with very complex stratigraphies. I recall vividly spending hours standing with my professor before one section (profile) talking through all the different ways one could draw and interpret the section. That exercise showed me very clearly that even the descriptive drawing of a section involves constructing a narrative interpretation. The theoretical underpinnings of everything we do as archaeologists should be part of education at all levels.

I have always, probably every year for the last 40 years, taught theory. Initially in the UK this was to undergrads and Masters students, and now in the States I teach it at both undergrad and postgrad levels. All this has certainly influenced my thinking about theory, and my books like 'Reading the Past', 'The Archaeological Process' and 'Entangled' have been very much influenced by these teaching experiences. Indeed, the teaching allowed me to try out the ideas in class so that I could better explain them in the books. I owe a great debt to many generations of students for being such willing and critical guinea pigs. You soon realise how ill-formed your ideas are when faced by a group of engaged, thoughtful, questioning students!

The way I try to teach theory is I suppose Socratic in that I try to lead people through the issues by asking them questions and getting them to (re)discover the ideas themselves, from first principles. This is obviously easier in a graduate seminar context,

and it is such seminars that I have always enjoyed most. I think there is some value in all theoretical perspectives in archaeology, and the trick is to get students to see the different perspectives from the inside and to discover the value that lurks there. Even if you strongly disagree with a perspective, there is great educational value in coming to an understanding of why those who think differently from you believe in what they believe.

Jana: Many colleagues feel a clash or tension between 'doing' archaeological theory and doing field work. You have a lot of experience with both. How has the one influenced the other for you?

Ian: Again, my experience is rather different in that I never could see the gap between theory and doing. I decided to become an archaeologist while still a teenager, and this was mainly because it was a way of meeting people and traveling. But in addition to this I found the actual process of digging an engaging intellectual exercise. Faced with a few traces in the ground, how could one build a story of what had happened there? I guess this is the same reason that detective stories are so popular on television; here too the problem is how to go from a few clues to whodunit. I found the intellectual effort of putting all the pieces together, working out what this patch of darker soil might mean, and realising that you had to keep changing your interpretation as more evidence was collected, fascinating. It was, and is, such a complex, non-linear process. You really have to think hard. And that is really all that theory is; thinking hard. So when later I wrote of interpretation 'at the trowel's edge', I was referring to the ways in which field archaeologists use theory all the time as they dig, deciding which change in texture to follow and which to excavate out, and which change in colour to pursue.

Jana: What aspects of being an archaeologist do you enjoy the most?

Ian: I think I partly answered this in response to the last question. Initially, it was the social life, and being outdoors rather than behind a desk. And it was the intellectual puzzle. In later years, however, especially at Çatalhöyük, I rarely get anywhere near a trowel or a trench. The project has become large enough that all I do is raise money, manage and direct. I miss the digging, but on the other hand I enjoy enormously the challenges of managing a large international, inter-disciplinary team. The job certainly has its daily crises, but I have very much enjoyed working with first-rate excavators and researchers in 33 (I counted them recently!) different specialisms or sub-disciplines. The site itself is so interesting that it has attracted the very best researchers and excavators and we have all found a way of working together. It is for me fascinating, bringing people from different backgrounds and different interests to collaborate and ask questions of each other, brainstorming to solve problems. Real inter-disciplinarity, as opposed to multi-disciplinarity, is hard but I find myself very engaged by the challenge and I think the pay-offs are huge.

I have also enjoyed very much the way being an archaeologist at Çatalhöyük takes me into other worlds, very non-archaeological. I have never really liked the idea of archaeology as a distanced world separated from public spheres. At Çatalhöyük I often feel thrown into a maelstrom of commercial companies and their advertising agencies, art shows, exhibits, fashion shows, media and entertainment. I have been very engaged by the ways in which people of all sorts get absorbed and fascinated by the site. I have been taken into places and met people that I would never have met otherwise. Çatalhöyük has opened doors for me and I

have had great fun dealing with this public aspect of archaeology.

Jana: What is your advice for the up-and-coming archaeologists – what will be important things to do for us and future archaeologists in the next decades?

Ian: So I guess my answer to this, given all that I have said above, is to remain questioning, but do good in-depth work, cross boundaries and be inter-disciplinary, and raise your heads above the trench and look outside the lab in order to engage archaeology in the outer world. Archaeology, like all the sciences, is becoming increasingly specialised. But in all the sciences you hear that the best work is done by people who learn from other disciplines and who are open to new ideas. You can become hyper-specialised. These days you probably need to. But at the same time you can seek ways to work with other researchers in other domains, and find ways to make your research engaging to wider audiences.