

Peter van Dommelen and Mieke Prent **The history,  
theory and methodology of regional  
archaeological projects** An introduction

The papers collected in this special section of *Archaeological Dialogues* were first presented at the fifth Symposium on Archaeology and Theory, held in Leiden on January 17th to 19th 1996 under the general heading of *The history, theory and methodology of regional archaeological projects*. The choice of regional research as the main theme provided the opportunity to discuss current theoretical perspectives on the basis of specific case studies, thus reflecting the concern of *Archaeological Dialogues* to balance theoretical and practical aspects of archaeology. Through the invitation of archaeologists from various backgrounds and countries across Europe, the diversity of research traditions was not only acknowledged but debate between them was also stimulated. Regional research projects had been chosen because they usually last for a considerable period of time, in the course of which theoretical insights, methodological premises and available techniques are likely to change. In this way, regional projects have repeatedly been suggested to represent a critical element in Dutch archaeology, setting off 'the Dutch experience' from developments in both Anglo-American and continental European archaeology (cf. Slofstra 1994; Hodder 1994). The past decades have moreover been especially prolific in generating new theoretical perspectives which may now often coexist with older ones. One of the key issues addressed at the symposium therefore concerned the interaction between changing theoretical and methodological perspectives and the practice of fieldwork. The effects of these relationships were critically assessed by several speakers in the context of a specific regional archaeological project, while others reviewed long-term developments of regional archaeological projects both North and South of the Alps.

The latter task has been undertaken by Andrew Sherratt and Graeme Barker, who cover north-western Europe and the Mediterranean respectively. Sherratt draws attention to the rarely acknowledged influence of generic various, specifically Western 'modes of thought' on archaeological thinking and in its wake on regional projects and attempts to situate these on a scale between 'Reason' and 'Romanticism'. Barker, by contrast, follows a more specific lead by tracing the local roots of regional archaeological projects in the (western) Mediterranean, calling to the fore the strong interdisciplinary approach developed in recent decades.

Two Dutch regional projects are discussed, each of which is carried out in the South of the Netherlands. Both the paper by Nico Roymans on the South-Netherlands project and the one by Harry Fokkens on the Maaskant project reveal an indebtedness to Dutch traditions as well as to Anglo-American theoretical orientations: a strong Dutch -or more generally continental- focus on empirical research is blended with theoretical approaches which are often inspired by

processual archaeology. The basic evidence for the resulting regional studies of long-term social and political developments is provided by a series of large-scale excavations of settlements and cemeteries rather than collected by regional surveys of surface finds. As elsewhere, the study of the relationships between land use and landscape perception marks a recent and continuing widening of research interests. In this context, the recognized importance of so-called 'off-site' features such as land divisions, roads, etc. is typically also dealt with by taking recourse to specifically designed excavation techniques and coring strategies.

Although differences in methodology may at first sight appear paramount, comparable trends can be observed in the Mediterranean, where regional projects are usually based on collecting surface finds. Many modern field surveys in this region - i.e. from the 1950s onwards - have been staged in the countryside of large, usually urban, settlements which were already known from ancient literary sources. In many cases, these cities had also already been explored in a long-standing tradition of extensive excavations. The methodology and underlying theoretical premises of Mediterranean survey archaeology in the following decades, however, were largely developed and articulated in opposition to established excavation and research practices of conventional Classical Archaeology, as far as this represented an unequivocal emphasis on ancient city-life (see e.g. Snodgrass 1987, 1-35). As in north-western Europe, 'off-site' archaeology seeks to explain the multitude of human activities taking place outside the cities. In the Mediterranean, however, the term primarily refers to the common phenomenon of a continuous spread of *surface* finds across the landscape rather than to buried features.

As in temperate Europe, this has entailed a debate on the fieldwork methodologies used, as is in particular illustrated in the paper by Nicola Terrenato. Outlining the fertile interaction between Italian and foreign (usually British) archaeologists who have traditionally been well represented in the Mediterranean through their Schools in the principal capitals, Terrenato shows how foreign ideas and local experiences have gradually given rise to both fresh approaches to the archaeological record and new sophisticated fieldwork techniques. The implied shift of interest away from the large urban centres has also increasingly redirected attention to so-called 'marginal' areas, as shows Peter Attema. His paper also represents a powerful demonstration how the surface evidence may be used in matters of interpretation by looking into the ideational dimension of landscape.

John Bintliff, who had introduced and skilfully chaired the main session of the symposium in Leiden, finally looks back at the conference and its debates, commenting on the papers subsequently submitted for publication in this special section of *Archaeological Dialogues*.

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Both Mediterranean and north-west European regional research projects can thus be seen not only to develop new sophisticated fieldwork strategies but also to move beyond socio-economic analyses by increasingly paying attention to the immaterial or ideological and symbolic aspects of landscape. As such, landscape archaeology may constitute a fertile common ground for a dialogue between archaeologists coming from different research traditions.

## References

- Hodder, I., 1994: The Dutch experience experienced from Britain, *Archaeological dialogues* 1, 36-38.
- Slofstra, J., 1994: Recent developments in Dutch archaeology. A scientific-historical outline, *Archaeological dialogues* 1, 9-33.
- Snodgrass, A., 1987: *An archaeology of Greece. The present state and future scope of a discipline*, Berkeley (Sathers classical lectures 53).