

ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND OTHER HISTORICAL SOURCES

A central problem for Historical Archaeologies is the encounter of archaeological and other historical sources. The problem is rather complex too, because of the many different ways this encounter can take place. In this box I will try to point out three main aspects. Firstly, the relationship between material and – at first glance – non-material sources shall be discussed with regard to their qualities as historical sources. This first step is fundamental to the latter as awareness of the historical comparability of the sources must pave the way for further methodological considerations. Secondly, the process of historically integrating a single archaeological source is dealt with: an asymmetric encounter of the sources as one intensely explored material source is confronted with a quite amorphous background of historical knowledge building on a huge amount of historical sources and interpretations. Thirdly, a more symmetrical but more complex situation is addressed: the deliberate and problem-oriented construction of an interdisciplinary context that integrates both material and “non-material” sources.

As Andrén pointed out, artifacts and texts and the relation between them can be perceived in different ways: as categories, as objects and as documents (Andrén 1998, 147f.). Moreover, artifacts and texts have to stand for the disciplines concerned with them and thus are often used in a fourth, metaphoric way. In the following, I will emphasize yet another level: artifacts and texts (and buildings and works of art) as historical sources – and, in doing so, simplify the discussion again (Frommer 2007, 140-149). On closer examination, all historical sources prove to be material – even oral information is not historically relevant if not materially recorded. Therefore, it is the level of things – the level of artifacts and ecofacts, at which the different historical sources are fully comparable (Fig. 1).

Sources	Archaeology, Buildings Archaeology	Documentary History, Art History	Possible starting Questions
Material Contexts	A.C./Bld.		How did they act?
Artifacts, Ecofacts		W.S./P.S.	What was there?
Symbols, Icons			What did they think?

FIG. 1 COMPARISON OF DIFFERENT MATERIAL HISTORICAL SOURCES WITH REGARD TO THEIR INFORMATIONAL STRUCTURE

At a higher level, all historical sources are material contexts, i.e. they consist of materially or structurally joint different parts or areas that allow multiple related looks at the source. This level is far more relevant when interpreting archaeological

contexts or buildings and less important (but still existent) when discussing written or picture sources. At a lower level, all historical sources can present symbolic or iconic information that can be read by those who are familiar with the codification (Peirce 1983, 64f.). That level is far more relevant when interpreting written or picture sources and can be totally absent in archaeological contexts.

When archaeological and non-archaeological historical sources are to be brought to historical evidence, they show rather different qualities: While written and picture sources bear the main part of information in icons and symbols, it is the material contextuality that procures most of archaeological sources' historical potential (Frommer 2007, 210, 234f., Abb. 60). That is why the material character of historical interpretation in archaeology is to be particularly pronounced (cf. the concept of "material hermeneutics" – Frommer 2007, 149-209, Frommer in press a), and that is why traditional historical source criticism is not satisfactorily conferrable to archaeology as argued by Eggert (Eggert 2005, 105f.). Archaeological source criticism is more about formation processes as espoused by deductivist archaeologies (Daniels 1972) – newly arranged in a hermeneutic way (Formation History – Frommer in press b).

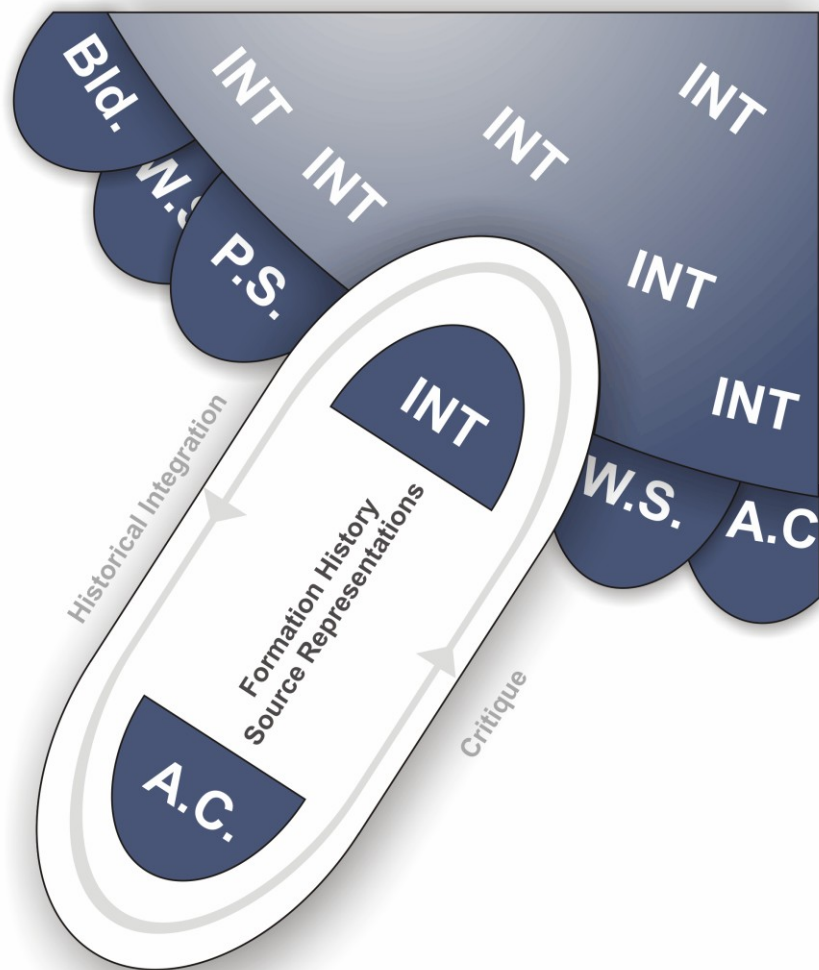


FIG. 2 AN ASYMMETRIC ENCOUNTER: THE HISTORICAL INTEGRATION OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

On this basis, Fig. 2 shows the simplest form of archaeological sources encountering “non-material” historical sources – or, more exactly, historical interpretations of a certain archaeological context meeting the amorphous historical background that itself consists of cross-linked interpretations. Unlike “Getrennt marschieren, vereint schlagen” (Wenskus 1979), the general historical background is critically used both as comparative information and historical setting in which the archaeological context has to be placed. In this process, circular reasoning – certainly a big problem in Historical Archaeology (Frommer 2009) – can be counteracted only by careful source criticism, methodological awareness and self-reflection. But as objectivity and anticipatory adjustment to theoretical fashions are dangerous too and, if we are attentive, as the material reality of the archaeological source provides us with a resistant counterpart, there is no reason for writing our own archaeological text against our neighbouring disciplines (Austin 1990).

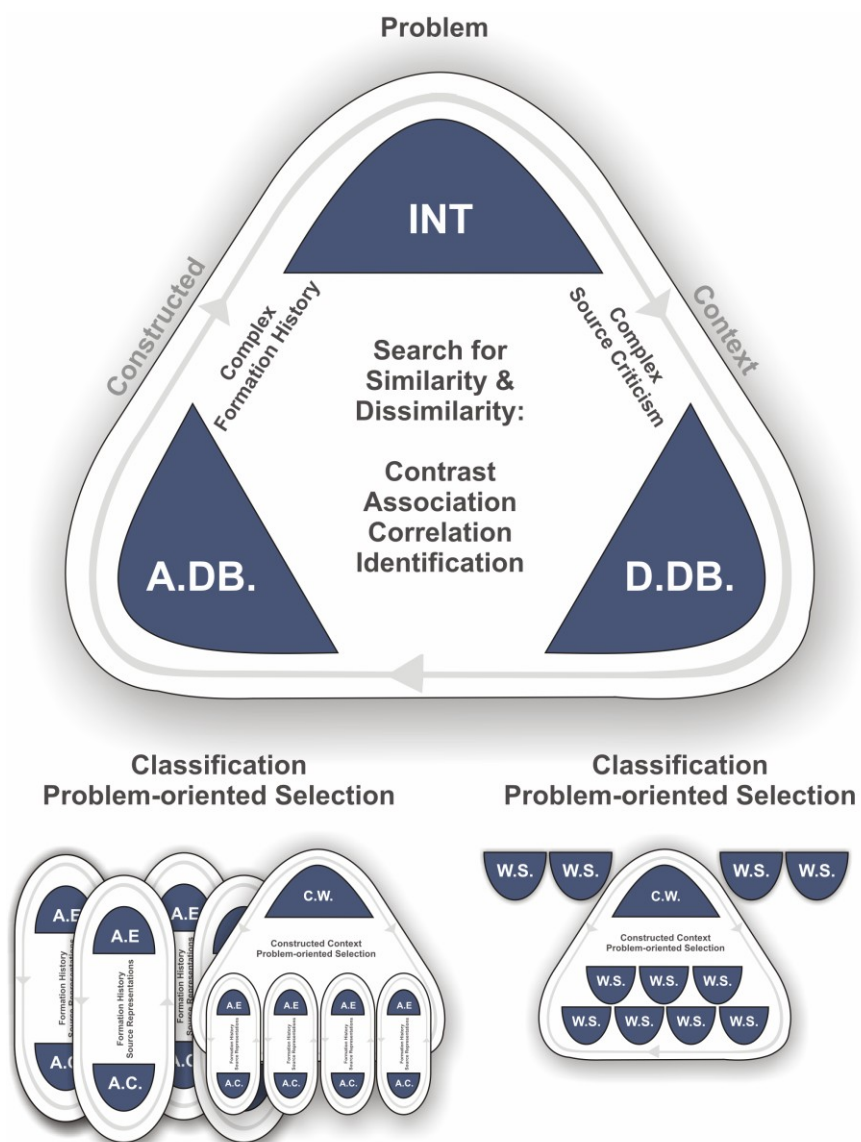


FIG. 3 A (NEARLY) SYMMETRIC ENCOUNTER: THE CONSTRUCTION OF INTERDISCIPLINARY CONTEXTS, BY EXAMPLE: BETWEEN ARCHAEOLOGICAL AND DOCUMENTARY SOURCES

If archaeology is considered a hermeneutic historical discipline it is possible to construct problem-oriented interpretive contexts that include data from both archaeological and non-archaeological historical sources (Fig. 3). Although still

characterized by different heuristics and different ways of source criticism, archaeological and e.g. documentary data can be interpreted together as a whole. Anders Andrén has pointed out a set of foci that determine the interpretive shape of such interdisciplinary contexts (Andrén 1990, 153-175): identification, correlation, association and contrast, all designed to support the (here:) hermeneutic search for similarities and dissimilarities. These foci do not exclude each other but can be alternated or combined in one and the same argumentation. The fifth of Andrén's types of contexts, classification, is presented as a different level in Fig. 3 as it usually precedes interpretation – not because it must or even should be conceived as a separated first step but because of the complexity of the context's construction that often will not allow recourse to classification for mere practical reasons.

It is also for mere practical reasons, that the level of sources, primary editions and comprehensive works that underlies the interpretive context, is marked as a separate foundation. An interpretive recourse to this level would be desirable, as extensive adjustment of interpretation and sources would depend on such a possibility. In reality, this possibility mostly does not exist, especially in archaeology where sources are not readable in the same comparably easy way that written sources are – which is why I specify the encounter in Fig. 3 as “nearly” symmetric.

This problem is a general one of all comprehensive work in archaeology and not specific to interdisciplinary contexts. To come up against it, such comprehensive works should be in some degree calibrated by micro-historical interpretations of single archaeological contexts addressed to the same problem that guides the comparable studies (Frommer 2007, 324-337).

Finally it should be stressed that the aspects of the encounter of archaeological and other historical sources that are highlighted in this box cannot stand for the problem as a whole with all its facets. I have discussed the problem as a methodological one and from a hermeneutic-historical point of view. Other approaches, of course, are possible.

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ABBREVIATIONS

A.C. – Archaeological Context, A.DB. – Archaeological Database, A.E. – Archaeological Edition, Bld. – Building, C.W. – Comprehensive Work, D.DB – Documentary Database, Int – Interpretation, P.S. – Picture Source, W.S. – Written Source.

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