

*The Archaeology of Time*

Gavin Lucas

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Review by Eleanor Marie S. Lim

*Graduate student, Archaeological Studies Program, University of the Philippines*

Generally speaking, time was not a concept of primary importance in ancient thought. The Greeks tended to regard the cosmic process as a cyclic alternation of opposing forces rather than as a continual evolution. Early Christian leaders rigorously disputed the traditional cyclical view of time. In the scientific revolution in the 17th century, Sir Isaac Newton viewed time as an independent variable, flowing on its own accord. Leibniz, a German philosopher and mathematician, perceived time simply as an order of succession. In the early 20th century, Albert Einstein published a paper on the theory of relativity wherein time is recognised as a fourth dimension (Gribbin and Gribbin 1997), completely changing notions about time.

In archaeology, the concept of time is of significance consequence in contemporary debates in archaeology, whether or not it is acknowledge. Since it is the very nature of our discipline, it greatly affects what we do in archaeology – especially in understanding the void that resides between ourselves and the subjects (or objects) of the study.

*The Archaeology of Time* is authored by Gavin Lucas, an Assistant Director of the Institute of Archaeology in Reykjavik. He stated in the *Preface* that this is something he should have written years ago. His doctoral thesis centred on the concept of time in archaeology. However, it was only after almost a decade that he was given the opportunity to write a short book about time for the Routledge series “Themes in Archaeology”. Comprising of five chapters, with each having subtopics, this book covers 136 pages. It aims to be an introduction to the concept of time in archaeology, containing an extensive array of themes and perspectives, and how time is understood and used in contemporary archaeology.

The first chapter, *Beyond Chronology*, divided into six short subchapters, focuses on chronology, and beyond. This section scrutinises

the assumptions archaeologists have about time in archaeology – especially how it is conveyed through the vital concept of chronology. It focuses on looking at the relationship between chronology and elucidation of cultural change, drawing out, more often than not implicit meanings and perceptions of time in these explanations. It includes an argument against the innocent use of chronology as the sole temporal context that archaeologists use to explain change. Lucas suggests that chronology illustrates time as a linear sequence and that this has greatly affected the conventional understanding of archaeological change. Thus, he examines alternatives to chronological temporal structures such as *Annales* and non-linear dynamics, which replace the linear conception of time with a well-organised thought of sequential paces. He refines these non-linear concepts of time by placing philosophical arguments (i.e., Zeno's arrow versus Aristotle's duality of time versus McTaggart's A and B series versus Bergson's inherent paradoxical time versus Husserl's time flux) into archaeological context, making its significance explicit. Moreover, Lucas briefly presented ways that other archaeologists have began to study the concept of time and its impact on the discipline.

Several themes were explored in chapter two – *Time and Archaeological Record*, namely, the sequential characteristics of archaeological records, palimpsests and timescales, time perspectivism, and structure of archaeological narratives. Lucas considers that the archaeological record is always dynamic and that these records are merely snapshots of the cultural pasts. He also convincingly argues that the past is inseparable from the present. He discards the idea of palimpsest as a simple, layering of events; replacing it as a more complex view of multiple, overlapping activities over diverse periods of time, which has different influences on archaeological records. Lucas criticises the notion of time perspectivism, stating that although the occurrence of multi-layered processes on different levels in a spectrum is recognised, time perspectivism is still very much dependent on time's linearity. Something similar is said regarding archaeological narratives – that it is presented in a directional, linear movement fractured into divisions.

Archaeologists have investigated multi-temporal past by looking how time was perceived in past societies. Chapter three, *Time in Past Societies*, explores how societies in the past understand the concept of time. Lucas talks on artefacts (objects) and how these were reused and reinterpreted. He also argues that time is multiple and that time, just like in the past, is perceived in several different ways. Moreover, he finds time

perception's restricted meaning very problematic.

The fourth chapter is a case study entitled *The life and times of a Roman Jar*, which integrated the many claims in the earlier chapters. Lucas admits that he has deliberately chosen the Roman Jar as his example because it supports his arguments in the previous chapters and hopes that with such ordinary subject, the readers would easily understand how the concept of time could be appreciated and dealt with any archaeological material. For Lucas, the jar represents two temporalities: chronology and age profiling. These temporalities are completely different and uphold different viewpoints of time.

In the final chapter, Lucas makes a point that archaeologists need to re-evaluate the problem of time in archaeology by rethinking the nature of the discipline itself. He also made an appealing argument of the uniqueness of archaeology as a discipline – that although archaeology is acquainted around temporality and material culture, it is not exactly naturally chronological. He ends this chapter by raising a significant question regarding the role of archaeology and whether temporalities define the discipline itself.

The issues Lucas had tackled are well written, direct, fluid, and organised. The language is simple, yet the content possesses a certain complexity that makes this book evidently intended for advanced undergraduates, postgraduates, and practicing professionals rather than those who are a novice in archaeology or archaeological theory. Unfortunately, this volume will probably not cause much impact in Philippine archaeology where theory and method are not nearly close allies as they are in United Kingdom. Even so, this brings up significant issues for consideration regarding philosophical and political motives of the discipline, and realistic problems of “doing archaeology” in Philippines.

### Reference

Gribbin, M. and J. Gribbin. 1997. *Eyewitness Science: Time and Space*. London: Dorling Kindersley Limited.

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