

## Research Article

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# That Raw and Ancient Cold: On Graham Harman's Recasting of Archaeology

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**Abstract:** This is a comment to Graham Harman's 2019 response to an article by Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen (2018) in which they propose that a materially grounded, archaeological perspective might complement Harman's historical approach in *Immaterialism* (2016). Harman responds that his book is indeed already more archaeological than historical, stipulating that history is the study of media with a high density of information, whereas archaeology studies media with a low density of information. History, Harman holds, ends up in too much detail, while archaeology has the advantage of lending itself to the imagination. Hence, his reading of history had the aim of tempering the historical information overload, in effect making the book a work of archaeology. In this comment, I want to do three things: (1) critique the idea that archaeological and historical media are inherently different with regard to their densities of information, (2) discuss how archaeology and history approach their media, and (3) reflect on conceptualisations of "archaeology" outside the discipline itself.

**Keywords:** archaeology, history, hot and cold media, sources, traces, dark matter

## 1 Introduction

Philosophy and archaeology have been mutually engaged for decades. Archaeologists have been reading, inspired by and even framing their approaches to the archaeological with direct reference to the work of philosophers. Likewise, philosophy – in addition to a number of related fields – has explored archaeological concepts and principles, or even the discipline itself, as a trope for thinking. Despite these rapprochements, it may seem the exchange between the disciplines has taken place in a rather oblique fashion, i.e. through archaeology's adoption of philosophical ideas and concepts,<sup>1</sup> and when philosophers refer to archaeology as metaphor and exemplar.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, associations between philosophy and archaeology have primarily transpired as intra-disciplinary monologues without much cross-fertilising dialogue: while archaeologists commonly engage with philosophical works and arguments, philosophers usually only refer to *the idea* of archaeology and rarely to archaeological literature itself. Recently, however, articles,

<sup>1</sup> To name but a few: Holtorf and Karlsson, *Philosophy and Archaeological Practice*; Johnsen and Olsen, "Hermeneutics and Archaeology;" Kluckhohn, "The Place of Theory;" Marila, *Introductory Notes to a Speculative Epistemology of Archaeology*; Olsen, *In Defense of Things*; Ribeiro, "Archaeology and the New Metaphysical Dogmas;" Witmore, "Archaeology and the New Materialisms;" Wylie, "Between Philosophy and Archaeology;" Wylie, *Thinking From Things*.

<sup>2</sup> E.g. Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*; Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*; Ranciere, "The Archaeomodern Turn;" see also Normark, "Hydrosocial Becomings," 117.

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respectively, by archaeologists Þóra Pétursdóttir and Bjørnar Olsen,<sup>3</sup> and philosopher Graham Harman,<sup>4</sup> have addressed the relationship of philosophy and archaeology, and their mutual positioning, as a more direct exchange, perhaps ushering in a more immediate dialogue between the disciplines.<sup>5</sup> I believe this exchange to have great potential for both disciplines; and as an archaeologist, I consider it an invitation to discuss certain elements that may need further elaboration to enrich the engagement between philosophy and archaeology.

To summarise the events of the recent exchange briefly, Harman<sup>6</sup> responded to a critique of his book *Immaterialism*<sup>7</sup> by Pétursdóttir and Olsen<sup>8</sup> who with their article sought to add an archaeological gaze on particular aspects of the book. In *Immaterialism*, Harman advances an object-oriented social theory, arguing that objects cannot be reduced to their constituent components, or to their effects, nor are they merely real if lending themselves to human perception. Harman uses the example of the Dutch East India Company (VOC) to explore and illustrate his argument, countering the notion within Actor-Network Theory and New Materialisms that “things must be replaced with actions, static poses with dynamic processes, nouns with verbs,”<sup>9</sup> and that an object “is nothing but its relations and discernible actions.”<sup>10</sup> Obviously, this critique must have quite some consequence for social theory, especially in light of Harman’s central and – in my opinion – invaluable point:

we overlook the question of what objects are when *not* acting. To treat objects solely as actors forgets that a thing acts because it exists rather than existing because it acts. Objects are sleeping giants holding their forces in reserve, and do not unleash all their energies at once.<sup>11</sup>

Pétursdóttir and Olsen welcome Harman’s approach to objects, and they proceed by asking what a particularly archaeological perspective might add to Harman’s historically based study of the VOC, i.e. by including a material dimension to the textual sources.<sup>12</sup> Even though their article might be read as an attempt simply at *adding* an archaeological dimension to a book based on historical sources, Harman responds by arguing that his book is in fact already more archaeological than it is historical.<sup>13</sup> This somewhat surprising spin emerges from Harman’s recasting of archaeology and history. While Pétursdóttir and Olsen base their understanding of the disciplines on the otherwise widespread notion that history is associated with the study of written sources, whereas archaeology works with material traces,<sup>14</sup> Harman stipulates that Pétursdóttir and Olsen “are not quite right in associating history with documents, and archaeology with ruined or abandoned objects.”<sup>15</sup> In fact, he argues that “archaeology’s tendency to deal with ruined fragments of objects rather than well-preserved documents is more symptomatic than essential.”<sup>16</sup>

Instead, he invokes media theorist Marshall McLuhan’s<sup>17</sup> notion of “hot” and “cold” media to recast the understanding of the disciplines. History, Harman stipulates, studies “hot” media, i.e. media with a high

<sup>3</sup> Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Theory Adrift.”

<sup>4</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting.”

<sup>5</sup> See also Ebeling and Altekamp, *Die Aktualität des Archäologischen*; Harman, “On Behalf of Form;” Olsen et al., *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things*, and Levi Bryant’s blog posts about participating as a philosopher in archaeological fieldwork, e.g. <https://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2018/08/09/svaerholt-encounters-with-the-real/>.

<sup>6</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting.”

<sup>7</sup> Harman, *Immaterialism*.

<sup>8</sup> Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Theory Adrift.”

<sup>9</sup> Harman, *Immaterialism*, 51.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Theory Adrift,” 101.

<sup>13</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 276.

<sup>14</sup> Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Theory Adrift,” 107.

<sup>15</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 271.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 272.

<sup>17</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*.

"density" of information, whereas archaeology works with "cold" media providing limited information in need of fulfilment by its interpreter in order to make sense. "Information" is, in this context, defined as "the visible content of any medium as opposed to its concealed background structure."<sup>18</sup> On this basis, Harman contends, an historian can provide copious details of recent stories, while an archaeologist is left to make "highly general statements" about remote bygones. This allows him to interpret the VOC "by casting aside most historical detail and identifying five or six 'symbioses' that made the VOC what it is," an operation he considers "significantly closer to an archaeology than a history of the VOC."<sup>19</sup> According to Harman, this has the benefit of allowing the archaeological approach to escape all "irrelevant detail in which the historian has to avoid being drowned,"<sup>20</sup> because "cold media provide limited information and thus have a hypnotic effect on its users, who are called upon to provide the missing information themselves."<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, images of archaeology often seem to revolve around an excavation in the desert, producing a few, flimsy bits and pieces of scattered remains, leaving the archaeologist to nothing more than guesswork and some general or even generic statements about the past. Even though this image of the field does mirror an occasionally very real archaeological situation, the discipline does in fact increasingly find itself mired in an information overload, and at least a partial return to the idea that the accumulation of ever more detailed information is a way to escape the ambiguities and relativity of interpretation. In particular, this results from the current enthusiasm for digitisation of swelling quantities of data, and, above all, for methods and data from the natural sciences, making some archaeologists believe that knowledge gaps and epistemological uncertainties may be replaced by more detailed information, more facts, and better analytical data.<sup>22</sup> In fact, archaeology's current predicament, one might argue, is the escalating confidence that its wealth of sources may be "heated" in ways that will do away with what I describe as the "dark matter" of the discipline: absence, fragmentation, vagueness, and tracelessness. For this reason, I wonder whether it is perhaps too simplistic to portray archaeological and historical media as, respectively, "cold" and "hot," since the degree of participation required to unpack their information also depends on the familiarity with the particular medium and on its degree of detail and clarity. In this sense, both archaeological and historical media may come in the full spectrum of temperatures.

In this comment, I approach Harman's philosophical interest in archaeology as an invitation to reflect on the character of archaeology and history in light of Object-Oriented Ontology (OOO), and more specifically the nature of archaeological and historical media. I welcome, and gladly embrace, Harman's notion that archaeological media lend themselves to unknowability, speculation, and the imagination. In a time dominated by a natural science discourse, perceived by many archaeologists to be able to radically reduce – even eliminate – archaeology's unknowns, I consider Harman's speculative perspective helpful, and perhaps even necessary if archaeology is to remain realistic. More than that, Harman's philosophical standpoint on what "archaeology" might mean effectively entails a recasting of the discipline and its conditions. I want to make clear that I am aware – and fully accept – that archaeology and philosophy may define a number of key terms differently. Of course, such conceptual displacements will have some consequence for the cross-disciplinary exchange. So, to be explicit, I do not have any quarrel with Harman's contention that "Venus is an object, as are neutrons, strawberries, crystalline spheres, thinking human subjects and the fictional sailor Popeye,"<sup>23</sup> although many archaeologists tend to associate "objects" with something tangible, synonymous with "artefacts," "monuments," or "landscapes." For me, the problem is not Harman's appropriation of "archaeology" for philosophical uses (which has a much deeper pedigree, to which I shall return), nor do I take issue with his identification of archaeological sources as marked by information gaps and epistemological uncertainties.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Harman, "The Coldness of Forgetting," 271.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>22</sup> Sørensen, "The Two Cultures."

<sup>23</sup> Harman, "Hyperobjects and Prehistory," 197; see Witmore, "Archaeology and the New Materialisms," 241 for an explicit archaeological embrace of Harman's all-embracing notion of objects.

<sup>24</sup> As argued at length in Sørensen, "In Praise of Vagueness."

Rather, my hesitation stems from the consequences I foresee of Harman's recasting of archaeology as the study of *categorically* "cold" media, because, ultimately, it means archaeologists have to give up the idea of their discipline as the study of material culture, materiality, or things. This will, I contend, distract from archaeology's potential for contributing to OOO. Therefore, in this article, I want to explore Harman's recasting of archaeology by addressing two issues. First, I suggest the idea of archaeological media as inherently cold leads to a problematic and somewhat impractical dichotomy between archaeology and history by referring to different levels of details in their sources, resulting in the notion that history is at large to make particular statements, while archaeology is limited to conversing at the general level. As I shall elaborate in the following, I believe this characterisation stems from conflating archaeology as a *trope* with archaeology as an ecology of *practices*. Instead, I would like to pursue an alternative that embraces Harman's notion of the unknowability of objects, while sustaining archaeology as an *engagement* with matter at a very particular level of inquiry. Second, I think it is not entirely unproblematic to redress the things archaeologists engage with as "media" and "information," because it implies that things are solely a means to something outside themselves, nesting some form of memory to be prized from their depths; as if the memory of things is all they are. Things may indeed be informative, as I shall discuss below, yet this is not all there is to them.

## 2 Sleeping dogs

This is not the place to introduce a philosophical readership to the history of archaeological thinking; suffice to say that since the middle of the twentieth century, the discipline has been debating whether its scope and its potential is to make statements about the general or the particular. To sum up, some scholars hold archaeology to be a discipline aiming for general laws and grand narratives, while others see archaeology as devoted to individual places and things. Some archaeologists consider the possibilities for archaeological statements almost unlimited, while others argue the discipline is restricted to making factual descriptions of artefacts. Yet, regardless of the level of inquiry, and irrespective of the degree of disciplinary confidence, any form of archaeological knowledge eventually has to connect with local horizons, relating the individual objects to their contexts, i.e. building on highly *specific* as opposed to general or exemplary circumstances.

Accordingly, for many archaeologists, I suspect, Harman's portrayal of archaeology may come across as somewhat peculiar. Contending that historical sources are replete with information and detail, while archaeology is restricted to making general statements, seems to omit the literary genre known as archaeological excavation reports. Frequently, these are endless volumes of information, describing and illustrating in mind-numbing detail each and every single artefact – or, more often, fragments of artefacts – discovered during fieldwork, but they also include observations about the composition of soil, its consistency and colour, and details pertaining to the interfaces between stratigraphic horizons. Traditionally, students of archaeology would be expected to be able to account for these seemingly ceaseless magnitudes of detailed information. A student might, for instance, be asked to summarise the number of animal bone fragments in human graves at the Early Natufian site, Ain Mallaha (Eynan), north Israel, hopefully also being able to relate what species of animals were present in the assemblage; whether the animals were domesticated or wild; how the bones were organised inside the graves, and how this distribution of objects maps out spatially at the site as a whole. In the case of Ain Mallaha, the student would hopefully be able to recall the remains of one of the earliest known domesticated dogs, accompanying an elderly woman buried some 12,000 years ago, carefully laid in the grave with her hand resting on the puppy placed beside her head.<sup>25</sup> Thus, the grave at Ain Mallaha offers a window into an event in time, a highly specific moment, when a woman and a dog were laid to rest.

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<sup>25</sup> Davis and Valla, "Evidence for domestication of the dog 12,000 years ago in the Natufian of Israel."

Therefore, I have some reservations about carving out history as characterised by “detailed accounts of actuality” as opposed to archaeology’s “slowly changing general conditions.”<sup>26</sup> First, I would describe archaeology as preoccupied with at least as detailed information as history, yet only of a different nature: things instead of texts. This point is clear in the field of “contemporary” archaeology, where, despite the availability of written testimony (and living informants and modern media), researchers sometimes chose to engage with material traces only, because they offer other perspectives than written sources (a point to which I shall return). Second, the abovementioned excavation reports are actually a translation of things into text, numbers, and images. Therefore, archaeology is not in any simple or exclusive way a discipline of things,<sup>27</sup> but often a discipline of things through text, when scholars conduct their research through publications.<sup>28</sup> Further than that, things – or at least a selection of things – may return to public availability in exhibitions. Hence, archaeological objects are circumscribed by a range of engagements and practices, ranging from survey and excavation over documentation and analysis to publication and exhibition.<sup>29</sup>

In this sense, archaeology’s media – its things – are marked by the same “actuality” that Harman connects with history:<sup>30</sup> for archaeological things to be available as sources of information, they need to exist in the present either physically, as negative traces, or in the form of documentation. Analysing such tedious and infinitely detailed information, archaeologists have sought to understand hunting techniques and subsistence strategies, technological choices and modes of production, exchange systems and social relations, mobility and migration patterns, human–animal relations, religious belief and power structures, and affect and atmosphere, locally and beyond.

These studies do indeed require the “participation” of the archaeologist, characterising “cold” media in Harman’s optics, but at the same time, archaeological “media” are not restricted to offering general statements. Rather, the generality or particularity depends on what questions we address to traces; what we ask them to do for us. A single canine bone fragment from the 12,000-year-old burial in Ain Mallaha surely will not be able to offer much information on, e.g. multispecies relations in the deep past. This is precisely why “context” is so important for archaeology. Context is about knowing where precisely an object was found, what other items were found in its immediate surroundings, what kind of structure the object was located at or within, what stratigraphic context it belongs to, what site it comes from, where the raw material for the object was procured, when it was made and deposited, and what information we have of similar objects from other places, including their social, environmental, and economic contexts. In addition to the notion of find context, and connections to other sites, archaeologists also work with context in the sense of how things become culturally meaningful, exploring how the understanding of an object not only relates to itself but also how it spawns metaphors, biographies, or conceptual associations. Pooling such multilinear strings of information – effectively “duoming” things – has the potential for making specific as well as general statements possible.

Archaeologists, I would claim, tend to perceive the capacity to pay close attention to this wealth of detail as one of the fundamental hallmarks of their profession. The discipline has a long tradition for cherishing traces indiscriminately, since each and every tiny, neglectable trace *may* prove to offer valuable information.<sup>31</sup> However, this does not mean that objects are real for archaeology only insofar as they are relational. Archaeology works with a category of objects, known as “stray finds” or “surface scatter”: objects with little or no association with other archaeological finds or structures in their environment. Such circumstances make it difficult to formulate meaningful statements about these objects and difficult to use the objects to shed light on other objects. Links have been severed and generalisations become futile. As a result, more often than not, archaeologists treat stray finds as unloved orphans. Nevertheless, I find it

<sup>26</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 272.

<sup>27</sup> To use the expression coined by Olsen et al., *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things*.

<sup>28</sup> Since archaeology is a destructive discipline, removing, e.g. building traces in the act of excavation or burning organic objects when radiocarbon dating, archaeologists frequently have no choice but to study things indirectly through publications.

<sup>29</sup> See, e.g. Olsen et al., *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things* for further elaboration on such object trajectories in archaeology.

<sup>30</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 272.

<sup>31</sup> Worsaae, *The Primeval Antiquities of Denmark*, 156.

unlikely that many archaeologists would claim these non-relational objects to be any less real than, say, the Stonehenge, the Giza Pyramids, or Fresh Kills Landfill. Archaeology thus shares object-oriented ontology's interest in tracing the dogs that did not bark as well as the audible ones.<sup>32</sup>

Yet, at the same time, archaeology proceeds in a different way from OOO, it seems to me, since archaeology tends to take a greater interest in the actual dogs and their traces more than in the figure of the dog. As noted by Harman and others,<sup>33</sup> examples appear frequently in OOO (and other aspects of philosophy), and in his response to Pétursdóttir and Olsen, examples include the VOC, fire, cotton, hammers, flowers, waves, a factory, the fork in Harman's hand, Caesar crossing the Rubicon, Caesar's fingernails and toga, and the statistics of American baseball games, in addition to the above-mentioned sleeping and barking dogs.

Many archaeologists, I suspect, would interrupt the stream of examples, asking: "since all dogs are different, exactly what dog are you talking about?" Indeed, archaeologists do use examples, but for examples to be workable in archaeology, archaeologists tend to want to know whether it was a wild or domesticated dog; how old the dog was; whether it was healthy or sick; how it might have died; whether it was found where it died, or if it died elsewhere; whether it was buried as a complete body or in fragments, or upon being cremated; whether the grave had been reopened or disturbed prior to the archaeological excavation. Sometimes, such details may make it possible to say something about individual dogs, humans, and other objects,<sup>34</sup> and from there, it may be possible to connect to additional finds of dogs, humans, and other objects in order to make particular as well as more general statements about multispecies relations.<sup>35</sup> One might even perceive the interface of the particular and general as a defining quality of archaeology as well as history, but probably no different from the humanities as a whole. In the words of literary scholar, Steve Mentz:

Sudden shifts of perspective, of subject matter, even of rhetorical mode, create intellectual combustion. What humanities scholars do best is perform that jump, the turn from the minutely textual to the wildly general, from tensions inside a single word to the endlessly flickering dance of the organic within and entangled with the inorganic.<sup>36</sup>

This traffic between the particular and the general, I believe, might also be of value in an exchange between archaeology's engagement with "sensual" objects and OOO's concern with "real" objects,<sup>37</sup> perhaps increasing the resonance of OOO as social theory outside philosophy. As I shall argue, archaeological, sensual objects withhold something from access in ways similar (but not identical) to real objects, and in this light, I suggest archaeology's familiarity with uncertainty and unknowns may add to the productive tensions between the particular and the general as well as the material and the exemplary.

### 3 Archaeology and the limits of what we can reasonably say

Not only is archaeology more interested in material objects than examples of objects, it is also interested in the *formation* of traces, wanting to know how and why things still exist rather than having vanished long ago.<sup>38</sup> This aspect of archaeology has quite some bearing on assessing the "coldness" or "warmth" of its media. Formation processes are part of the constitution of archaeological objects, since the formation of the archaeological record is subject to human as well as non-human interventions and processes. Moreover, I think Harman's reconstruction of particular moments of "symbiosis" in the life of the VOC corresponds well

<sup>32</sup> Harman, "The Coldness of Forgetting," 275.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>34</sup> E.g. Maher et al. "A Unique Human-Fox Burial;" Tchernov and Valla, "Two New Dogs."

<sup>35</sup> E.g. Wengrow, *The Origins of Monsters*.

<sup>36</sup> Mentz cited in Alaimo, "Unmoor," 305.

<sup>37</sup> Harman, *Immaterialism*, 3.

<sup>38</sup> See Lucas, *Understanding the Archaeological Record*; Lucas, "Evidence of What?"



with Pétursdóttir and Olsen's inquiry into archaeological "object careers."<sup>39</sup> Like the VOC, archaeological sites and objects may be seen as forming in irreversible stages, i.e. as "distinct phases in the life of the same object rather than the creation of a new one."<sup>40</sup>

Yet, with Harman's adoption of McLuhan's notion of hot media as synonymous with history, he seems to equate historical documents with modern media that have not been exposed to some degree of decay or transformation, existing in an ideal, intact condition. Largely, historical sources tend to be formed by an author and by the creator of the archive in which the text is included. In addition, historical sources are co-created by decomposition, mould, fire, water, paper mites, hackers, digital data degradation, conservators, archivists, translators, or historians. Hence, historical documents, like archaeological traces, are frequently marked by manipulation, physical gaps, or some form of obscurity, for instance, in the case of cuneiform tablets of Near Eastern antiquity, oftentimes presenting themselves with cracks, broken off or eroded material, or entirely missing pieces.<sup>41</sup> Consider also a historical document like the Icelandic "Book of Settlements" (*Landnámabók*), a medieval description of the 9th- and 10th-century settling of the island. The book is composed from several sources, some based on oral tradition, others on sagas, and some written as an inventory. Several editions of the book exist, and their differences testify to continuous re-workings and redactions, adding new material, while omitting other aspects, making it an "unstable" historical document.<sup>42</sup> Here it may be worth recalling historian Carlo Ginzburg's observation that "historical knowledge is indirect, presumptive, conjectural,"<sup>43</sup> since historical sources sometimes deteriorate or emerge in the present with various kinds of gaps or silences (Figure 1). If I understand Harman correctly, these breaches might be what make such historical sources archaeological, because they are no longer "pure" information but a more ambiguous and dimmed form of media.

Yet, archaeological sources are not *occasionally* damaged or marked by lacunae: they are *always* fragmented, touched by pre- or post-depositional processes; ageing, animal burrowing, patina, putrefaction, vandalism or looting, or archaeological intervention. Such an observation seems agreeable with Harman's notion of the archaeological as "cold" media, but when he simultaneously claims that Pétursdóttir and Olsen are mistaken when associating archaeology with ruined or abandoned objects,<sup>44</sup> I believe he revokes, or at least defers, an important aspect of the discipline. Here I refer to archaeology's methodical grounding in a careful attention to traces and their formation processes, i.e. how they end up presenting themselves to us today in the way they do. In this sense, archaeology is defined by the particular emergence of its traces, and not by outside generic, conceptual frameworks in terms of "hot" or "cold" media.<sup>45</sup>

In this light, Harman's observation that archaeology may enjoy a certain privilege in comparison with history's abundance of media heavy with information is particularly urgent for the scholarship of contemporary archaeology. Within this field, archaeologists study the traces of the immediate and most present past, *sometimes* by focusing on things exclusively, abstaining from consulting written sources, living informants, or mass media. This choice is based on the notion that each of these media speak different languages, none of which is truer, realer, or more informative than the others. Philosopher Knut Ebeling goes as far as arguing that the "traces of the contemporary (be it as simple as leftovers) can only be secured through visual, material, or archaeological operations, not through historical ones,"<sup>46</sup> because "perhaps

<sup>39</sup> Harman, *Immaterialism*, 42–51; Pétursdóttir and Olsen, "Theory Adrift," 101.

<sup>40</sup> Harman, *Immaterialism*, 49–50.

<sup>41</sup> Fetaya et al., "Restoration of Fragmentary Babylonian Texts," 22743.

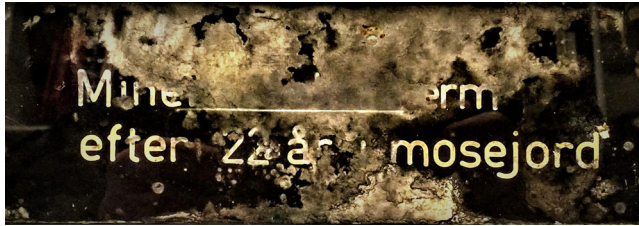
<sup>42</sup> Barraclough, "Naming the Landscape in the Landnám Narratives," 91.

<sup>43</sup> Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 106.

<sup>44</sup> Harman, "The Coldness of Forgetting," 271–2.

<sup>45</sup> A peer reviewer kindly called my attention to Harman's criticism of Stengers' reliance on "emergence," which he rejects as a case of duomining, "reserving for entities themselves nothing but the amorphous status of inarticulate Aristotelian matter, fit only to be shaped by our 'Ecology of Practices';" Harman "Stengers on Emergence," 104.

<sup>46</sup> Ebeling, *There Is No Now*, 95.



**Figure 1:** Partially dissolved cardboard sign. Translated from Danish to English, the text fragment reads: *Mine(?) [] []erm(?) after 22 years in(?) peat soil*. The author purchased the sign from its previous owner who found the sign clearing his deceased father's garage. Original context, date and find spot unknown; exact meaning of the sign unclear. Photograph by the author, Islands Brygge, Copenhagen. January 20, 2021.

the world of things, material cultures and debris contains a completely different world.”<sup>47</sup> This approach to the alterity of things thereby unfolds as a form of archaeology that remains independent of history,<sup>48</sup> not because history is deficient, but because different media offer different potentials, responding to different questions posed by the researcher. In short, things “bring to light other or alternative aspects and other histories than those produced through historical sources and engagements.”<sup>49</sup>

This also means that when Harman claims that “no scholar would turn down the chance to read well-documented histories written by the elusive Etruscans or Native Americans,”<sup>50</sup> he implies that text is *sui generis* more informative than things, and that the character of information provided by text is more desirable than that emerging through things.<sup>51</sup> However, seen from an archaeological perspective, text is just one amongst an array of media, and it may be as informative or mute as any archaeological artefact; not hotter or colder *per se*. Many facets of society, many events, many objects, may never appear in historical documents, deemed too irrelevant to be described in words, or perhaps deliberately silenced or overlooked; e.g. the disenfranchised and the subaltern,<sup>52</sup> the things that are simply too insignificant or mundane to be recorded,<sup>53</sup> or things that become blasted from the trajectories of cultural history.<sup>54</sup> In such cases, historical documents may be entirely “cold.” Conversely, archaeology’s traces might expose the material remains of such events and people, because things may cultivate the unsaid and the non-discursive, and what exceeds words.<sup>55</sup> This is one of the reasons why archaeologists sometimes excavate – i.e. *re-collect* – people and events that are otherwise unaccounted for in historical texts, e.g. in cases with no written testimony of their disappearance or of the crimes leading to their deaths.<sup>56</sup>

Hence, for archaeology, the challenge is not so much the temperature of its media. Traces can be full of information or virtually silent. However, as noted earlier, this all depends what kinds of questions we ask of traces; some archaeologists may be interested in the origins of an individual from the Bronze Age, probing into her bones, teeth, hair, and dress for chemical, aDNA, and strontium evidence.<sup>57</sup> Others care less for the retrospective aspects of traces and want to explore if and how we might get in touch with objects, to see

<sup>47</sup> Ebeling, “The Art of Searching,” 9; see also Rathje and Murphy, *Rubbish*.

<sup>48</sup> Pétursdóttir, “Small Things Forgotten,” 585.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 585.

<sup>50</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 277.

<sup>51</sup> In addition, the mention of possible sources written by the Etruscans and Native Americans may suggest that the archaeological study of things implies what I have called a “double ontological divide” (Sørensen, “Den Ontologiske Vending,” 109): first a divide between the native and the material traces, and second a divide between the traces and the researcher. Hence, the researcher is twice removed from the native (I am grateful for a peer reviewer for pointing out this condition).

<sup>52</sup> E.g. Burström, “Selective Remembrance;” van Dommelen, “Subaltern Archaeologies.”

<sup>53</sup> E.g. Deetz, *In Small Things Forgotten*; Pétursdóttir, “Small Things Forgotten.”

<sup>54</sup> E.g. Pétursdóttir, “Climate change?;” Pétursdóttir, “Drift;” Pétursdóttir, “In Passing.”

<sup>55</sup> See also Olsen et al., “After Discourse.”

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Crossland, “Violent Spaces;” González-Ruibal, “Absent Bodies;” Renshaw, *Exhuming Loss*.

<sup>57</sup> E.g. Frei et al., “A Matter of Months.”



where objects are heading.<sup>58</sup> In other words, some archaeologists import methods and data from natural sciences to dissect the evidence as a medium that may be probed for its information, while others are inspired by the arts, aiming to “release” things in closer alignment with Harman’s proposition that art is a type of cognition that does not reduce objects by mining them.<sup>59</sup> The former approach seeks to transfer archaeological objects into scientific representations in the present, whereas the latter aims to presence the archaeological object, inhabiting the object as a new becoming.<sup>60</sup> As such, archaeology’s traces are no cooler or hotter than historical documents that might otherwise be perceived as saturated with information. Rather, the temperature of media is not inherent but defined by the practices surrounding them.

Even though some archaeologists work hard to scrutinise their finds for information – “undermining,” “overmining,” and “duominig” them, to use Harman’s vocabulary<sup>61</sup> – archaeology’s sources will forever be characterised by absence, fragmentation, and vagueness, as well as occasional tracelessness, i.e. the “dark matter” of archaeological traces.<sup>62</sup> This is an inescapable condition for the discipline, which, in the course of its history, has led to numerous debates as to the proper attitude to the challenge. This relates specifically to the alleged “cold” conditions of archaeological media. It may be worth recalling that McLuhan not only speaks of *densities* of information but more importantly about degrees of *participation*.<sup>63</sup> In cold media, such as speech,

so little is given and so much has to be filled in by the listener. On the other hand, hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience.<sup>64</sup>

However, as literary scholars have shown, the degree of participation required for “completing” a medium is not simply a matter of text or non-text. A literary text may be perfectly complete, yet it still leaves out a host of elements to be filled in by the reader. Roman Ingarden<sup>65</sup> thus speaks of “empty places” (*Leerstelle*) in the text, and Wolfgang Iser<sup>66</sup> refers to “places of indeterminacy” (*Unbestimmtheitsstelle*) that lend themselves to the reader’s imagination, allowing her or him to make connections in the novel that ultimately tie in the narrative. The point is that historical and literary media are not automatically characterised by a higher temperature than archaeology’s media. Text compels participation through interpretation, whereby the historian or reader connects the various parts of the text, making sense of it *because of* textual lacunae and ambiguities. Add to this the historical method of source criticism, which installs a critical lens in the reading of any kind of “information,” questioning the reliability and usefulness of seemingly neutral accounts and statements. In addition, source criticism helps preventing the historian or philosopher from overreacting to, in Harman’s words, “histrionic incidents” in the lifetime of an object, because it may lead to the over-emphasis on “great ceremonies, battles, weddings, treaties, massacres, annexations, and discoveries.”<sup>67</sup> Perhaps, one might argue, hot media demand at least as much participation as cold media in order for their flood of immediately visible content to be sensible and, not least, to be able to identify the missing elements in an information stream that otherwise might seem to leave nothing out. Curiously, Ebeling argues that “history’s text is lacking a primary visibility and materiality,”<sup>68</sup> which might challenge the perceived association between historical media and immediately visible information.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. Bailey, “Disarticulate – Repurpose – Disrupt;” Bailey, “Art/Archaeology;” Bailey, “Releasing the Visual Archive.”

<sup>59</sup> Harman, *Art and Objects*, 2.

<sup>60</sup> Compare with Harman, “Materialism is Not the Solution,” 94.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology*.

<sup>62</sup> The most explicit acceptance of uncertainty as a property of the archaeological is represented in the works of feminist archaeologists since the 1980s; see, e.g. Gero, “Honoring Ambiguity/Problematising Certitude,” and references therein.

<sup>63</sup> Also noted by Harman, “Editorial Introduction,” 594.

<sup>64</sup> McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 23.

<sup>65</sup> Ingarden, *The Literary Work of Art*.

<sup>66</sup> Iser, *The Act of Reading*.

<sup>67</sup> Harman, *Immaterialism*, 52.

<sup>68</sup> Ebeling, “The Art of Searching,” 9.

A simultaneously creative and critical reading is called upon for historical documents to make sense, and the same applies to non-textual archaeological remains. Archaeologists have debated precisely the question whether providing the missing information themselves is inevitable, and should be embraced by the imagination, or whether such speculative measures damage the credibility of the discipline and must be avoided. These debates have led to a periodically changing archaeological landscape characterised by shifting research designs and priorities. What “archaeology” is, as well as opinions about how it ought to be practiced, thus morphs and moves, and I perceive Harman’s interest in archaeology as adding momentum to necessary, ongoing redirections of the discipline.

## 4 Fossilising archaeology as a trope

Despite these debates and continuous changes within the field of study itself, it seems the idea of archaeology has remained largely unchanged within other disciplines, where “archaeology” tends to be condensed into a somewhat static trope or metaphor. As Harman<sup>69</sup> notes, Michel Foucault is widely regarded as the philosopher cultivating “archaeology” as a philosophical term, and I would like to take a moment to briefly explore a selection of these philosophical adaptations of archaeology. The list of philosophers referring to archaeology is long, and without scrutinising all of them, one might mention a number of approaches within and outside philosophy, for instance Giorgio Agamben’s “philosophical archaeology,”<sup>70</sup> Edmund Husserl’s “phenomenological archaeology,”<sup>71</sup> Sigmund Freud’s stratigraphic approach to the soul,<sup>72</sup> Jacques Derrida’s “archeology of the frivolous,”<sup>73</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s likeness of archaeology and shadow,<sup>74</sup> Walter Benjamin’s “excavation” of memory,<sup>75</sup> or his *Urgeschichte* (“pre-history”) of the nineteenth century,<sup>76</sup> or Jacques Rancière’s mythological “archaeomodernity.”<sup>77</sup> These non-archaeological uses of the term “archaeology” are what Ebeling (himself a philosopher, media theorist, and art critic) refers to as “wild archaeologies:”<sup>78</sup> untamed, undisciplined forms of archaeology.

The above-mentioned non-archaeologists may indeed represent a refreshingly feral attitude to the discipline, yet they mostly have a propensity to refer back to archaeology as a trope or metaphor; not as a material engagement, nor as an “ecology of practices” in the words of philosopher Isabelle Stengers.<sup>79</sup> In this sense, “wild archaeologies” are acquisitions of “archaeology proper” as much as they are alternatives to history and historiography as the dominant figurative approaches to “the past.”<sup>80</sup> For Freud, for instance, archaeology is about the origins of phenomena, retracing the sources of traumas, when layers of memory are “archaeologically” peeled back. A similar attitude is found in Rancière’s notion of archaeology as “a materialist geography” that “is necessarily dependent on an idea of the *archaeon*,”<sup>81</sup> i.e. always having to refer to origins. In this context, one might allude to Agamben’s contention that archaeology goes beyond the conscious and the unconscious, reaching “the fault line in which memory and oblivion, lived and un-lived, both communicate and divide.”<sup>82</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 272.

<sup>70</sup> Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*.

<sup>71</sup> Husserl, “Phänomenologische Archäologie.”

<sup>72</sup> E.g. Freud, “Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria.”

<sup>73</sup> Derrida, *The Archeology of the Frivolous*.

<sup>74</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow.”

<sup>75</sup> Benjamin, “Excavation and Memory.”

<sup>76</sup> Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, N3a,2 (in the English version, Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin translate the German *Urgeschichte* into “primal history;” Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*).

<sup>77</sup> Rancière, “The Archaeomodern Turn.”

<sup>78</sup> Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 1*; Ebeling, *Wilde Archäologien 2*.

<sup>79</sup> Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices.”

<sup>80</sup> Winthrop-Young, “Hemerochronia,” 144.

<sup>81</sup> Rancière, “The Archaeomodern Turn,” 39.

<sup>82</sup> Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 102.

Although Agamben and Rancière constructively refrain from determining with confidence whether something belongs to the past or the present,<sup>83</sup> philosophical uses of the term largely tend to label “archaeology” as belonging to a discrete past, casting archaeology as a form of retrospection in order to understand the present condition, to grasp the endurance of the past into the present, or to explore origins. The operation of archaeology is thus perceived as reaching back to an anterior moment. Hence, Freud applies archaeology as a figure for proceeding from a problem of hidden memories and present-day repression towards increasing clarity and explicit knowledge in the probing of the psyche's past.

In a recent article on hyperobjects and prehistory, Harman represents a similar charting of the terrain of archaeology, stating that prehistory “by definition lies behind us rather than in front of us.”<sup>84</sup> While it is not incorrect *per se* to associate prehistory with a chronological horizon range preceding the present, the division is not without some complications, which also challenges archaeology proper. Without speaking on behalf of all my colleagues, it is my impression that many archaeologists implicitly connect “prehistory” with a “remote past” and with a reality before Modernity. Modernity may describe a somewhat coherent epoch, mindset, or condition (coined by Moderns themselves), but juxtaposing Modernity with an equally homogeneous premodern or prehistoric way of thinking (also coined by Moderns) may not be entirely unproblematic. Archaeologist Severin Fowles thus makes this important observation:

The modern may have diverse local manifestations, but it is still drawn into a kind of historical singularity through the insidious effects of colonialism, global capitalism, industrialization, nation-state building, and international warfare. The premodern is a radically heterogeneous congeries of historically unrelated phenomena. To compare modern and premodern is not to compare apples and oranges. It is to compare apples with vast orchards of oranges, plums, pomegranates, kiwis, strawberries, and any number of other fruits that no one alive today has ever seen or tasted.<sup>85</sup>

More than this, “prehistory” literally means “before history,” but it is probably more meaningful to say that prehistory is simply the part of reality not described in written media, regardless of age and date. In this perspective, there is no time dimension or chronology associated with “prehistory:” present-day objects may also be studied through methods otherwise applied to ancient objects. Indeed, Harman<sup>86</sup> acknowledges this aspect when referring to excavations by Olsen and others<sup>87</sup> at a German Second World War prisoner-of-war camp at Sværholt, Norway. In this perspective, prehistory is not behind us, as the linear, modernist time concept dictates; prehistory can be all around. Prehistory may also be imminent or prescriptive, for instance, when nuclear waste planners have to anticipate a post-historical future, devising communication systems devoid of words to warn unknown future species against the perils of nuclear waste repositories.<sup>88</sup>

In part, Foucault's understanding of archaeology resonates with Harman's, describing archaeology as “a discipline devoted to silent monuments, inert traces, objects without context, and things left by the past.”<sup>89</sup> Moreover, Foucault adopted the notion of archaeology in order to “grasp the implicit systems which determine our most familiar behavior without our knowing it. I am trying to find their origin, to show their formation.”<sup>90</sup> Hence, Foucault uses archaeology not simply as a term to describe that a phenomenon has a

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<sup>83</sup> For instance, Agamben describes how the division of historical phenomena into a “before and an after, a prehistory and a history, a history of the sources and a historical tradition” is misleading, because they “are in actuality contemporaneous, insofar as they coincide for an instant in the moment of arising” (Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 95). Likewise, Rancière contends that the mythological origins nested in his notion of archaeology are future oriented, continuing to keep open a “narrow passage through which no Messiah is likely to come” (Rancière, “The Archaeomodern Turn,” 40).

<sup>84</sup> Harman, “Hyperobjects and Prehistory,” 207.

<sup>85</sup> Fowles, *An Archaeology of Doings*, 12.

<sup>86</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 277.

<sup>87</sup> Grabowski et al., “Teillager 6 Sværholt;” Olsen and Pétursdóttir, “Sværholt: Poetics of Memory;” Olsen and Witmore, “Sværholt: Recovered Memories from a POW Camp in the Far North.”

<sup>88</sup> Dawney et al., “Future World.”

<sup>89</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 7.

<sup>90</sup> Cited in Garland, “What is a ‘History of the Present’?,” 369.

past dimension but more crucially to illustrate that the phenomenon continually is shaping and reshaping, forming in non-linear strata and with gaps (much like Benjamin's pre-history of the nineteenth century). Interestingly, Foucault pays particular attention to archaeology's concern with *discontinuities*, which is where the capacity for making general statements becomes disrupted. He argues that archaeology "is much more willing than the history of ideas to speak of discontinuities, ruptures, gaps, entirely new forms of positivity, and of sudden redistributions."<sup>91</sup> Foucault goes on to state that archaeology proceeds in the opposite direction of history: "it seeks rather to untie all those knots that historians have patiently tied; it increases differences, blurs the lines of communication, and tries to make it more difficult to pass from one thing to another."<sup>92</sup> Opposite Freud, the consequence of Foucault's figure of archaeology is that it cannot simply remain an operation that reveals the hidden; it also turns out to be a procedure exposing fault lines and dead ends. Similarly, for Agamben, archaeology is about retracing its own trajectory from the seeming availability, visibility, and coherence of information in the present "back to the point where something remains obscure and unthematized."<sup>93</sup>

Importantly, Harman does not simply refer to archaeology as a passive trope; he also adopts the notion of archaeology and redirects it. In doing so, he may be seen to proceed along the same lines as Agamben and Foucault, and clearly also in the same direction as Pétursdóttir and Olsen, pursuing a morphological approach to the formation of concepts. By refusing to merely reproduce archaeology as a homogenised figure – by refusing to stay within bounds – Harman arguably engenders a "wilder" archaeology than a number of those accounted for by Ebeling. At least to some extent, Harman seems to be recasting archaeology in a way that breaks with retrospective conceptions of what the discipline is and what it studies (a contribution and challenge I welcome in particular). However, I believe it is worth emphasising one of the key arguments in Pétursdóttir and Olsen, which is that method, theory, and materiality can – or should – be approached as a continuum. Effectively, for Pétursdóttir and Olsen, epistemology and ontology are collapsed into one stratum, "entangling knowing and being."<sup>94</sup> Hereby, archaeological traces change from solely being a source of information about something outside themselves (e.g. how a grave may inform us of burial customs, or how bones are an index of health and nutrition) to also being formative of archaeological thinking in its own right, making it possible to be "learning through encounter, from things."<sup>95</sup> Things are key in this context, because they are not a temporal or classificatory constant, and cannot be reduced to mere purified signification or exemplification, because things "are not representational intermediaries to something else beyond them."<sup>96</sup>

Precisely this critique has been directed against scholars such as Freud and Foucault in their conceptual approach to archaeology, turning it into something "cleaned and sanitized – detached from the direct engagement with things and the earth that characterizes archaeology."<sup>97</sup> Rather than purified and stable, things and earth act and react in the encounter with the archaeologist. In this perspective, an archaeological approach to objects has to pay attention to their particular qualities and relations. It takes into account their potential independence, singularity, and detachments, as well as their connections to other objects, observing how they affect, shape, and tincture one another. Most importantly, it takes seriously the transmutability of things and the mutual responsiveness of researcher and the object of study. This is why I, following a host of other archaeologists,<sup>98</sup> stress archaeology as an engagement, or an ecology of practices, referring to Stenger's notion of practice as "part of the surroundings which produces its ethos."<sup>99</sup> The

<sup>91</sup> Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 169.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 170.

<sup>93</sup> Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 8.

<sup>94</sup> Pétursdóttir and Olsen, "Theory Adrift," 107.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>96</sup> Antczak and Beaudry, "Assemblages of Practice," 91.

<sup>97</sup> González-Ruibal, "Reclaiming Archaeology," 1.

<sup>98</sup> Marila, "Slow Science for Fast Archaeology," 103–5; Olsen et al., *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things*, 55; Pétursdóttir, "Small Things Forgotten," 578; Witmore and Shanks, "Archaeology: An Ecology of Practices," 382.

<sup>99</sup> Stengers, "Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices," 187.

consequence of this argument, if I am not mistaken, is that archaeology must dispense of generic examples, instead taking particular objects seriously in their capacity to affect theorisation.<sup>100</sup>

Archaeology, I contend, is an engagement with things, and many of these may be described as unpredictable, restless, uncategorisable, or “unruly.”<sup>101</sup> In archaeology, it can be infinitely difficult or even impossible to tell one thing from the other, because the archaeological is “in large part a result of accident or at least a sum of contingencies too complex to calculate.”<sup>102</sup> Hereby, an archaeological engagement with things may complement the more abstract philosophical examples within OOO by thinking through messy, disorderly things. This has the potential for adding a different kind of irregular and erratic quality to objects than the one deriving from controllable examples, cushioned within the narrative defined by its human author. This is of course also the point made by Pétursdóttir and Olsen, asking how attention to archaeological objects, unleashed from the domain of human discourse, might contribute to Harman's object-oriented social theory.

Importantly, amongst these unruly things, I believe we have to include absence, fragmentation, vagueness, and tracelessness, all of which are so formative of the archaeological. In effect, this means archaeological objects cannot be classed as either “hot” or “cold,” because the media of their mediation are themselves subject to relentless metamorphoses and unruly states of being. Some transformations are created by organic processes, or by spatial relocations and frictions, others by random or deliberate human intervention, and others again by epistemological approaches (in terms of physical engagement as well as theoretical framework). In short, the archaeological does not deteriorate from some idealised, pristine “original” condition in the past into a decayed, incomplete state in the present. Rather, the archaeological gradually becomes ever more complete, *adding* lacunae and obscurity to its topography (Figure 2). Since I consider uncertainly to be an aspect of information, this means archaeology's dark matter is not in any simple or categorical way a cooling effect.

Dark matter, however, is not a uniform property of the archaeological, and describing archaeological traces as generically “dark” without further concern for the character of the darkness would evade a central question: what creates the uncertainty of *traces*, for instance in comparison with the *media* of history and journalism? As an archaeologist, I consider myself tasked first and foremost, in every encounter with every object, with asking whether the object's unknowns arise from its ontological darkness, from epistemological ambiguity, or from my scholarly incapacity of accounting with clarity for the object.<sup>103</sup> The real archaeological challenge is, in my opinion, that all of these factors characterise archaeological traces in various ways, and this condition obliges me to chart the origins of uncertainty in the encounter with objects. Referring back to McLuhan's notion of information as the “visible content” of a medium as opposed to “its background structure,” I thus claim absence, fragmentation, vagueness, and tracelessness to be part of the visible content *as well as* the background structure of things, effectively collapsing surface and depth. This, to me, is the flat ontology of objects.

## 5 Baby, it's cold outside

It is this non-discriminatory uncertainty of objects, their partial unknowability, their obstinacy, smeared edges, and rugged, slippery topography, which I see as connecting archaeology and OOO.<sup>104</sup> These fields

<sup>100</sup> See also Lucas, “The Mobility of Theory;” Olsen et al., *Archaeology: The Discipline of Things*; Pétursdóttir, “Things Out-of-Hand;” Pétursdóttir, “Drift;” Sørensen, “The Triviality of the New.”

<sup>101</sup> Olsen and Pétursdóttir, “Unruly Heritage.”

<sup>102</sup> Dawdy, “Antihistory,” 334; see also Sørensen, “We Have Never Been Latourian,” 10–1.

<sup>103</sup> Sørensen, “In Praise of Vagueness,” 742, 746.

<sup>104</sup> Similar and other connections have been pursued elsewhere; e.g. Edgeworth, “Grounded Objects;” Pétursdóttir, “Climate Change?;” Pétursdóttir and Olsen, “Theory Adrift;” Sørensen, “The Triviality of the New;” Witmore, “Archaeology and the New Materialisms.”





**Figure 2:** A new topography. Photograph by the author. Vicolo del Cedro, Rome. February 27, 2020.

seem to me to have much to offer one another, and I believe OOO may inspire an alternative to the current proliferation of the idea that the perceived coldness of archaeological media can be heated by importing ever more evidence and detailed scientific methods. Information loads are amassing and getting ever denser, and some archaeologists even claim to be working with “Big Data” methods in order to cope with the abundance of information. The air is indeed getting hotter in some segments of the archaeological profession, where science methods and data are perceived as allowing for increasingly certain knowledge and unwavering statements about the past. For some, it seems, advanced scientific approaches promise to compensate for the darkness associated with the archaeological.

However, as Harman notes, “we should not assume that everything flows from colder to hotter as more information is discovered.”<sup>105</sup> What is at stake is not the quantitative accumulation of information, but its qualitative constitution. In my opinion, Pétursdóttir and Olsen offer a timely alternative to the escalating archaeological scientism when they embrace OOO, adapting it for particular disciplinary purposes but also taking the liberty to reroute philosophical doctrine. This is why they argue theory should be considered “adrift,” moving in accordance with encounters with the messy and unruly materiality of the archaeological. This attitude counters dogmatic approaches, destabilising any hardened compartmentalisation of theorisation, method, and objects, or, in other words, epistemology and ontology. In a similar sense, Agamben speaks of archaeology as the practice pertaining to “the moment of a phenomenon’s arising,” which is why archaeology must forever engage anew its sources and its tradition rather than remaining stable. He argues that the moment of arising “is indeed situated on a threshold of undecidability between object and subject. It is never the emergence of the fact without at the same time being the emergence of the knowing subject itself.”<sup>106</sup> For this reason, the consequence of seeing theory as “adrift” leads to an acceptance that a field of research cannot be fossilised into an exact, lasting trope. What archaeology “is,” what it is “about,” or what it studies, are therefore constantly in transformation as an ecology of practices.

<sup>105</sup> Harman, “The Coldness of Forgetting,” 277.

<sup>106</sup> Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 89.

I concur with Harman, when he observes that the fragmentation associated with archaeological traces is often seen as a weakness of the discipline;<sup>107</sup> and I fully agree with him that this condition should be perceived as a potential instead of a drawback. As I see it, archaeology may precisely enjoy the mandate for speculation and a commitment to the aesthetic, granted by its ever-present dark matter and inescapable uncertainties;<sup>108</sup> following Agamben, the power of the imaginary may indeed be archaeology's very gesture.<sup>109</sup> Since archaeology can never lead to an exhaustive knowledge of objects; however, exhausting the amount of details, there will always remain an unknown or an uncertainty, inviting – perhaps even demanding – speculative, imaginative, and aesthetic methods. If I read them correctly, this is exactly one of the consequences of Pétursdóttir and Olsen, perhaps represented most explicitly in Pétursdóttir.<sup>110</sup> So when Harman argues in *Immaterialism* that objects cannot be exhausted by their relations, in the form of their components or effects,<sup>111</sup> it seems to me that Pétursdóttir and Olsen pursue precisely these things that break free of relations, yet not only in ontological terms but also epistemologically. That is, the written testimony and archives, on which Harman bases the example of the VOC in *Immaterialism*, will necessarily be set in a relationship with its human authors, custodians, and translators. On the other hand, approaching the VOC through things may appreciate how relations have been severed, and how things cease being knowable with reference to their relations.<sup>112</sup> Or, at least, things cease being knowable through their anterior relations, instead making new and unexpected connections. This does not mean, however, that things are *exhausted* by their relations, but it may be through these interfaces we begin to get in touch with them anew.

Obviously, I am not a philosopher (nor an historian), and the subtleties of OOO might be lost on me. Yet, if I am not entirely mistaken, Harman's point is that no real object can ever be fully "known," regardless how much information we have of it. To me, it appears that whatever an object withholds is irrespective of disciplinary methodology, regardless of whether media are hot, cold or lukewarm. Thus, while real objects "exceed any possible access to them," sensual objects "are fully accessible to the mind but partly buried behind the accidental costumes they wear in any given moment."<sup>113</sup> However, from Harman's response to Pétursdóttir and Olsen, it seems to me he argues archaeological objects are more obstinate in withholding information than historical documents, reflected by his notion that history (and journalism) is overloaded with more immediately accessible information,<sup>114</sup> whereas archaeological objects are "cold." Yet with archaeology's interlacing of ontology and epistemology, as proposed by Pétursdóttir and Olsen, neither real nor sensual objects are *ever* fully accessible. As Pétursdóttir argues, "there will always be a darkness involved in our encounter with the thing – a hidden excess integral to its being, and its potential futures."<sup>115</sup> Archaeological traces suggest, I think, that objects, sensual *and* real, can enjoy a space "after discourse."<sup>116</sup> In other words, unlike historical documents, archaeological traces may not "be about" anything, yet this does not mean they have to be relegated to the purely epiphenomenal and derivative.<sup>117</sup> Accordingly, an object-oriented archaeology cannot make do with things as "symptomatic"<sup>118</sup> but has to take on things as we encounter them. Through things, as Pétursdóttir argues, archaeologists conventionally tend to seek "other histories and alternative histories," yet she also criticises archaeologists for not seeking *beyond* history. She contends things do indeed offer "an alternative perspective on history,"

<sup>107</sup> Harman, "The Coldness of Forgetting," 272.

<sup>108</sup> Sørensen, "In Praise of Vagueness," 758–9.

<sup>109</sup> Agamben, *The Signature of All Things*, 106.

<sup>110</sup> E.g. Pétursdóttir, "For love of ruins;" Pétursdóttir, "Drift."

<sup>111</sup> E.g. Harman, *Immaterialism*, 3.

<sup>112</sup> For this reason, I do not read Pétursdóttir and Olsen as a criticism of Harman but as an attempt to further his arguments in a morphological and archaeological sense.

<sup>113</sup> Harman, "Object-Oriented Ontology," 403.

<sup>114</sup> Harman, "The Coldness of Forgetting," 272.

<sup>115</sup> Pétursdóttir, "Climate Change?," 184.

<sup>116</sup> Olsen et al., "After Discourse."

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>118</sup> Harman, "The Coldness of Forgetting," 272.

but she also goes one step further, insisting that the memory of things may *differ* from history, which implies that things do not have to end up “as means towards an end.”<sup>119</sup>

The consequence of this reasoning is that archaeology’s partial independence of history allows the discipline to make a more creative rapprochement towards philosophy in the vein of OOO. For this exchange to become mutually productive for both disciplines, I contend we may have to question our familiarity with words and numbers, and challenge our simultaneous estrangement from things. I hold our confidence with text to be the condition that makes it seem as if things withhold something from us that historical sources do not do to the same extent; that things are more secretive and mysterious, while texts and words are familiar, speaking a language we (think) understand more immediately and comfortably. Yet, in an archaeological perspective, things and words are not categorically different, and objects do not withhold more information than historical documents; rather, our modern mindset may simply be estranged from things, seeing them as external and outside to us. Thus, perhaps, we are the ones who coldly withdraw from things.

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<sup>119</sup> Pétursdóttir, “Small Things Forgotten,” 587.

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