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Translating the Past. The Archaeological Dimensions

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"Translating the Past" is presented here as the ultimate ethical dimension and task of archaeological work, and explained as an archaeological capacity to transfer empirical archaeological knowledge into the understanding of – and taking lessons from – the past for the sake of the our present and future. This contribution elaborates upon the personal and professional intellectual dimensions for such translations: 1) stressing that they are rooted in individual archaeological dispositions 2) forming the positions of archaeological accountability, which can 3) create powerful terminological frameworks, allowing 4) for "Translating the Past." Accordingly, this contribution's strong advocacy for a general accountability of archaeological work favours the translation of modern terms into historic meaning, in order to reach a public understanding for historic processes and the lessons from them. All this, however, is subject to the selective and subjective nature of archaeological dispositions found in the schools of thought, and with individuals (which ideologically must not have a firm contact with archaeological empirics). This contribution also proposes for "Acts of Archaeological Accountability".

This contribution also results from personal experiences in the profession, and from a controversy which arose at the ICAANE workshop on "Neolithic Corporate Identity" (Basel 2014; cf. the proceedings: Benz et al. 2017). It was about using a modern term ("corporate") for discussing Neolithic phenomena. When digging deeper into this controversy I encountered some basic problems with interacting archaeological epistemology, self-reflection, and defining disciplinary aims. This essay tries to raise awareness of these implicitly known basic conditions of archaeological work. The complexity of the topics, however, can only be superficially touched by the required brevity of this contribution, and it oversimplifies things.

I admit that "Translating the Past" is not a topic for colleagues who regard the archaeologies as self-contained historical subjects, or think that empirical data can hardly be modulated by personal dispositions. It seems that, for them, dedication ends at the spot where the message and advocacy of archaeologies should begin. Apart from archaeological accountability I ask: is this the point at which the disciplines' rights or privileges to exist are questioned by those who better see investments transferred to life sciences, especially in times of funding constraints? Isn't this the point to become aware that archaeologies should move, offering their potential share to life sciences? Is "Translating the Past" the bridge to be applied in archaeologies, bringing back "awarenesses" of past generations for sustainable life modes and landscapes, as well as establishing history-based responsibilities?

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Dimension 1: archaeological frameworks

The higher aim, and moral, of archaeological work as a historical discipline is translating the past into the present for the sake of the future. Translations of the Past are ruled by diversified sights and manipulations,[1] resulting in ever-changing competitive historic truths and propaganda throughout times, steered by ever-developing schools of thought and their interrelated frameworks, dispositions, accountabilities and terminologies.

Already, these two simple, and rather provocative, statements frame the controversial fields of "Translating the Past" in archaeologies; they fundamentally lead to questioning any firm validity in historic understanding: it is the nature of historic "truths" and facts that they are many, changing, fabricated, and faked to serve current interests. The most effective elements of the highly manipulative aggregates of historic thinking in the archaeologies are:

- the research capacity, as well as the political and ontological dispositions of the individual researcher;
- the general political, cultural, funding, intellectual, and research historical background within which research operates;
- the power given to empirical substrata and foci of research agendas;
- the involved types of disciplinarity (mono-, inter-, multi- and transdisciplinary agendas and approaches, and combinations of these).

The general archaeological meaning of "Translating the Past" implies an interpretation and transfer of empirical archaeological data and findings into historically meaningful understanding and perception, not only explaining the historic foundations of our present and future, but also elaborating upon the lessons to be learned from past developments.[2]

Fig. 1 explains the (simplified) incorporate framework – or *cuadro* – of "Translating the Past" in archaeologies. It basically shows that any archaeological "Translation of the Past" more or less results from a successively self-embedded process, or procedural passage through levels/ steps, during which cognition and results prepare conditions and instruments of translating a past. It explains that (changing) archaeological dispositions rule the level of (changing) archaeological accountability by which (a changing) archaeological terminology is steered. Subsequently, terminology becomes the key instrument in understanding and presenting a "Translation of the Past"; terminology reacts in a highly adaptive manner to changes on all the other levels. The static and linear nature of the highly simplified *cuadro* of **Fig. 1** aims to illustrate just the principle by which "Translating the Past" is reached and becomes transparent. This graph does not aim yet to reflect the complexities and the interaction loops between the levels as well as (the existing) sub-levels, but claims that a completed passage through these levels is a presupposition for "Translating the Past". Thereby, "Translating the Past" would not work correctly with missing or ill-developed

1 This contribution does not deal with the types of "Translating the Past" as practiced in the various fields of popularising archaeology, as attested with TV documentaries, popular science magazines, tabloid news, etc. These are mainly guided by commodifying archaeological subjects for *Zeitgeist* needs; in Germany, e.g., such contributions use and serve functions like Unexpected Sensation, Topicality, Emotion/ Identity, Superlatives, Relevance (Marion Benz, pers. comm.). This contribution also avoids discussing how mainstream archaeologies are influenced by popular trends in the "knowledge culture".

2 In the context of this contribution, "Translating the Past" does not mean, of course, translatological or hermeneutical efforts.

Fig. 1. The simplified 'cuadro' for Translating the Past in archaeologies. Graph: Hans Georg K. Gebel.

levels of archaeological accountability or terminology (for definitions of these levels see the paragraphs below), and the transparency and perception they provide.

The simplification of the *cuadro* aims to also serve other important needs: it is neutrally designed to help other culture's concepts for constructing and "Translating the Past" (*sensu* cultural relativism), or to allow a universal and "holistic epistemology" in the archaeological "Translation of the Past". The "cartesian" and rather linear-taxonomical historic thinking and time concepts in western academic spheres is just one of the ways to be practised in "Translating the Past"; explained further under this contribution's last subheading. Whenever conventional western archaeologies touch the spheres of indigenous archaeologies, or makes contact with indigenous perceptions of the past, meeting their narrative and meronomic elements and different concepts of history and time, the *cuadro* remains applicable. For example, it is extremely interesting to experience the misunderstandings arising between native Near Eastern Ph.D. candidates in archaeology and their western supervisors when conflicting perceptions of the past meet and are not recognised. Other examples for different concepts of time and the past are Marion Benz's (2020) recent thorough reflections on the understanding of time in Neolithic societies, which abandoned the linear sectors of historiography and "entered" prehistoric time ontologies, or the different indigenous concepts for the past in traditional Bedouin societies (Gebel 2015).

In the following, the characteristics and meaning of Dimensions 2–4 are described as "operative" measures required to translate the past.

Dimension 2: archaeological dispositions

Archaeological dispositions result not only from the empirical substrata of archaeological research, but they are mainly influenced and brought forth by the archaeologist's developing personal, political/ideological, and professional experiences, including socio-economic and intellectual dependencies through affiliations to archaeological schools of thought. This is meant in the broadest sense, covering culturally and ethically (*sensu* ethics) and/or ontologically induced perceptions of life. The role of a "genuine" human interest in the past remains obscure but might also be taken into consideration.

Data and science-oriented archaeologies often reject the role of archaeological dispositions

and accountability, and, on the whole, consider approaches like "Translating the Past" as "non-scientific" and subjective (cf. also the Afterword). At the same time, it remains neglectful to a basic demand of research: to provide total transparency and testability for results, to which – of course – information on the personal and professional dispositions of the researcher belongs. We may discuss whether some sort of "objectivity" may exist in dealing with the mere data. But, as soon as they are channelled through a recording or presentation system, data becomes subject to interpretative disposition and subjective matters. They are ruled by selective mindsets. I never found the claim proven that empirical data and findings can be presented free from – or are not "loading" – interpretative or ideological dispositions (ideological is meant in the broadest sense). Thus, only a research offering transparency for its dispositions – and this is imperatively demanded when "Translating the Past" – makes the disciplines' methodologies and epistemologies an honest affair. To be transparent (*sic!*), my understanding in this is guided by Schopenhauer's complex concept of "Subjective Idealism". The archaeological disciplines, like all of the humanities, are asked to expose the personal research dispositions for the sake of transparency and testability; the latter to the extent that is possible. Tools like testable theses sets might help research transparency when results are channelled through lower and higher levels of abstraction. The reality is that publications are void of such information and contain – at the utmost – only indications about the personal and professional backgrounds behind results.

Animosities and criticism between colleagues often do not arise from controversies over mere data and findings; quite often they target – unexplained and obviously rather unconsciously – the anticipated ideological and personal background involved in interpretations. For example, it is self-evident that a Marxist archaeologist will criticise the use of the term "commodification" for early productive environments because the term is loaded in this milieu of construct by certain connotations (e.g. social exploitation); I return to this example under Dimension 4.

The role of an archaeologist's individual dispositions must not be evident when these are covered by affiliations to seminar- or project-based schools of thought or general thought spheres (post-processualism, post-structuralism, neo-evolutionism, and others). Archaeological dispositions are predominantly formed by all sorts of education, attachments, and life experiences and developments therein; they may play a greater role in choosing affiliations than the attraction towards the affiliation itself. However, the traces of social (and economic) dynamics in research affiliations and struggles can hardly become a required subject of transparency in archaeological dispositions; that would go too far, and is mentioned here only as a crucial factor in archaeological dispositions.

"Translating the Past" is not a familiar or established archaeological disposition;[3] accordingly, almost no epistemic or systematic methodological efforts were invested by archaeologies into "Translating the Past". It is beyond this paper's focus to present such efforts, or provide a comprehensive overview on elements of this complex web of interwoven potential personal and professional archaeological dispositions. However, after listing the major categories and milieus of archaeological dispositions, a personal

3 I should mention here, as one of the rare examples, that Ian Hodder's recent publications attest implicit approaches to translate the past, especially and also by some of the contributions he assembled for "Consciousness, Creativity, and Self at the Dawn of Settled Life" (Hodder 2020). Thirty years ago, Ian Hodder characterised himself as the "poet of the Neolithic" when he tried to describe his disposition to explain Neolithic life (Hodder 1990, 279). I praise this honest view on the subjectivity of our research.

example is presented to explain them; it should be kept in mind that it is always a combination of the following categories that make up an archaeological disposition.

Professional dispositions' sphere:
- general disciplinarity (rule of general research frameworks and their conditions, interpretative constraints, academic habits, etc.);
- targeted disciplinarity (rules of specific research frameworks and their conditions, sometimes with holistic, systemic and transdisciplinary working theses);
- school and project attachments, including constraints close to *Arkanprinzipien*, often attested with (persisting) teacher-student relations;
- affiliation to thought spheres and their demand of ideological submission.

Personal dispositions' sphere:
- attachment behaviour and life experiences from childhood;
- educational substrata (influencing behaviour with empirical data, interpretative dispositions, abstraction capacities, philosophical and scientific dispositions and the like);
- political and ethical maturing (resulting in ideological fixations, moral values, world views, humanistic attitudes, etc.);
- political and ethical engagement/campaigning capacities;
- a possibly inherent ontological "interest" in the past of humans.

In order to further illustrate Dimension 2, but to avoid collegial and academic misunderstanding by using examples from others, the following "sample" of interwoven persons/individual and professional dispositions is taken from my very own archaeological dispositions. It explains the holistic background, by which my holistic concepts like Neolithic territoriality, commodification, polycentricity, ideocracy, habitus, etc. were generated.

Growing up in the early 1970s, the author's dispositions were nourished by anti-imperialistic thinking and an imperative respect of native cultures' integrity, gradually moving on to holistic world views using systemic and multidimensional approaches. Active remnants of Nazi thinking in the German, and personal, environments of that time supported this development, together with travelling to the Near East from the age of 16 and experiencing as a young student the poverty and emergency in Azari villages together with the post-colonial behaviours of foreign archaeology, and so on. Throughout decades of professional self-reflection, a strong moral impetus and critique developed against self-contained archaeological research, which academically exploits archaeological and indigenous social and cultural resources and expressions; just for its own sake and without accepting further responsibility. As a consequence, an imperative respect of cultural expression and its "products" – whether (pre-) historic or sub-recent/traditional – ruled my approaches in archaeology. In addition, already in the 1970s, universities' conservative archaeological milieus were ignorant and exclusive with, and for, alternative perspectives on the disciplines. While I am grateful to Hans Nissen for the academic openness he granted and taught to his students, the often ruthless academic and personal behaviour among colleagues, and the unfortunate influence of administration on teaching and research further affected my understanding of institutionalised archaeological research. In all this I survived for decades with my personal and permanent struggle for a humanisation of archaeologies.

My early anti-imperialistic and anti-colonial attitudes must be considered as the direct cause for many of my personal archaeological dispositions and advocacies for respecting the integrity of cultures. When becoming a professional, such dispositions easily included

past cultures, with fundamental consequences for my research attitudes and concepts. In terms of cultural theory, my development adopted much from cultural relativism. This means that a certain past or present cultural ethos can only be understood through, and within, its particular cultural foundations and framework, and not by "universal" or absolute anthropological supra-frameworks and approaches. The latter is in danger of violating past and present cultural integrities, or resulting in cultural imperialism being practiced, as is often observed with UNESCO projects up until the present day. Accordingly, I understood that terms used to describe cultures have to always be defined solely for the culture under consideration, and are not directly applicable to other cultures. This also preserves chances to identify traits of past and present cultural diversity, again a basic demand and ingredient of cultural respect. For disintegrating living cultures this leads, e.g., to the ultimate request to support and preserve vanishing lifeways for safeguarding cultural integrity (Gebel 2015). For (pre-) historic cultures and generations, I dare to raise the question: Should they not also be subject to cultural respect and human rights, beyond the archaeological respect they should receive.

In terms of artefact understanding this led to a strict biographical approach, tracing and respecting the social life of an object and its cognitive contexts from the natural source via manufacture, use, recycling, depositional stages until its interaction with the archaeologist, becoming part of his/her life by excavation, recording, and publishing. The same is true for findings. Artefacts are not "dead"; they were part of a living world like organic remains and they are revived by archaeological research. If the archaeological translator accepts the role and practices it with testable and epistemic means, past cultural expression and behaviour may be exposed with a higher probability than is the case with "alien" research agendas.

Dimension 3: archaeological accountability. Acts

Archaeologies in general are commonly understood and practised as empirical and material-focused disciplines, with little or no political responsibility and engagement. Archaeological accountability is barely covered as a subject of academic teaching and studies, while there exists some departments and institutes characterised by a focus on that. The latter mostly relates to the developed archaeological accountability of a teacher/researcher. Archaeological accountability becomes a topic primarily through field work; by critically analytical students trying to investigate and find their relation and place in the disciplines. This especially true when they are motivated by experienced structural violence accompanying the study (e.g. Bernbeck 2008), or by researchers growing in front of the disciplines' credibility problems. There are archaeologies in which accountability is at the forefront of a subject: indigenous archaeologies are such fields, especially when indigenous students join classes and projects. Multidisciplinary specialisation and field work as well as shocking experiences and events raise the probability that archaeological accountability becomes a subject. A good example is the increase of heritage awareness of archaeologists as a consequence of the *da`esh* destruction of cultural assets in Bilad al-Sham: archaeological accountability is immediately heightened when heritage safeguarding becomes a need, or heritage studies become part of archaeologies. Moral impacts caused by either shocking, or questionable experiences may also promote "trajectories" of archaeological accountability, e.g. the paucity of host cultures in foreign archaeologies, or the post-excavation treatment and storage of excavated human remains.

Conversely, these statements potentially mean that archaeological accountability hardly develops with isolated or "unconnected" archaeological or historical research. This

ivory tower or *l'art pour l'art* syndrome may persist in special sectors and with certain researchers (e.g. in epigraphies), but increasing shares of multidisciplinary exchange and positions of cultural relativism are working against this. Archaeobiologies are drifting towards archaeoethnobiologies, opening new and further chances for learning lessons relevant to the present, e.g. from Holocene climate research. A recent result of archaeological accountability thinking is the concept of "Applied Archaeohydrology"; the rehabilitation of ancient water management and knowledge for a sustainable present-day use of water sources (cf. Gebel and Wellbrock 2019 and references therein). It stands as an example for the other chances of promoting archaeological accountability, mainly in the fields of applied archaeo(bio)logies.

In foreign archaeological projects, digging, running away, and publishing the new findings for one's own and the discipline's sake is a dominant aspect of academic(s') behaviour; it has often been – and still is – accompanied by hidden, or more overt colonial attitudes and behaviour (e.g. Gebel 2019). These unpleasant, and meanwhile possibly rarer, attitudes are a problem for the host countries' heritage and cultural sustainability, and always remain an urgent subject of archaeological accountability and intervention (e.g. Gebel 2014b).

Critical archaeological intervention exists, especially against conventional research practices and understanding as well as against colonial and politically ignorant attitudes in archaeologies. Among those, the research and teachings by Reinhard Bernbeck and Susan Pollock became a constant voice in remembering archaeological accountability (Pollock and Bernbeck 2005, 1–40). Another, more recent category of intervention is the claim for the humanisation of archaeologies (e.g. al-Nahar and Clark 2013). But there are not many of these researchers and teachers; they are in permanent danger of becoming isolated and neglected in the webs of mainstream archaeologies and administrative structures.

Increased archaeological accountability does not necessarily evoke an emergence of "Translating the Past"-concepts. Furthermore, this must be considered as a consequence of raised archaeological accountability, representing a preceding condition of research behaviour that may take a long time to develop. In all of these aspects of archaeological accountability, practised concepts of cultural relativism would be curing …

In the following pages I propose some preliminary and condensed "Acts of Archaeological Accountability", aiming to further initiate the rethinking of archaeological research agendas (relating to ethno-anthropological research as well); to create more sustainability in the archaeological disciplines; to approach new and suitable terminologies; and to prepare the frameworks for "Translating the Past".[4]

1) Individual researchers and projects acknowledge and accept to have a general professional archaeological accountability to establish and follow sustainable agendas and perspectives in the disciplines. Teaching and projects establish and maintain special sections devoted to sustainable research activity. Academic and funding lobby work is invested to receive the means for this activity. ("Responsibility Act").

2) Individual researchers and projects understand and accept that doing archaeology includes and demands the translation of data and findings of the past for a sustainable

4 Contents and structure of the acts' set are similar to what was proposed for safeguarding the Bedouin legacy, cf. Gebel 2015.

engagement and advocacy for cultural and natural heritage. In the cases of foreign archaeology projects, research has to also serve and support the host's social environments for field projects, including their cultural assets. Long-term projects are a general need for archaeological accountability. ("Sustainability and Empathy Act").

3) Individual researchers and projects invest increased awareness, consciousness and care for present-day issues resembling similar (pre-)historic evidence/situations, and try to translate their research into meaningful analysis and advice for both the present and future; they accept developing an understandable and well-defined terminology to assist with this. ("Translation Act").

4) Individual researchers and projects employ approaches of cultural relativism to enable embedded research, especially in foreign archaeological projects. This covers agendas targeting past and present subjects of research, reaching from direct embedment and related accountability in the traditional host cultures to extended transdisciplinary deep-knowledge research on the ethologies and ontologies of past cultures. Embedment in traditional host cultures accepts bilateral inclusion, exchange, and cultural teaching at eye level, advocacy for safeguarding local cultures, and charity engagement. ("Embedment Act").

5) All previous acts are subject to means of transparency and testability, or supervision and cannot come into use or practice without a sound empirical knowledge.

Dimension 4: archaeological terminology

When we coined the term "Neolithic Corporate Identity" and proposed a workshop on that topic (Benz et al. 2017), basic objections were expressed by some colleagues. How can we operate, and confuse, by the use of a modern term and concept as used by McDonald's and airlines, franchise companies and belief groups? And: doesn't a modern concept fake dates and avoid insights into (pre-) historic ontologies? Or: how can the term "commodification" be used in early productive Neolithic contexts (Gebel 2010) if it becomes bound to the Marxist understanding of *zur Ware werden*, or stands for Karl Polanyi's "fictitious commodification", representing alienation processes etc. in capitalistic market environments? These critiques took place despite the terms were presented within their special Neolithic definition and had been working very well for these contexts.

For a long time we did not understand the problem, thinking that, as long as we evaluate and define terms for Neolithic contexts, we are allowed, and even obliged, to use modern terms if no other suitable term exists, or can be coined which has the capacity to expose the ethological and ontological Neolithic features needed for the historical discussion. Moreover, we understood that modern terms re-defined for the Neolithic would be "mediators" when "Translating the Past". In addition, we did not see the need to invent new terms for any new Neolithic feature, and continued to define suitable terms from other contexts needed for "deep-knowledge" Neolithic research (ethology, habitus, ideocracy, infrastructure, etc.). By that time, however, I discovered that the problems behind the critiques lies much deeper.

While acknowledging that terms' meanings can be "copyrighted" to features for which they were designed, this cannot extend to the concepts behind terms. Concepts can, and must be varied/variable. The use of seemingly "modern" terms in archaeological/historical research does not mean a use of its modern concept and connotations, provided that the term was redefined for a (pre-)historical situation or feature. Terms are labels for societal, economic, and cognitive/ideological features, which express very

different "ideas" in their historical contexts. If today we understand "corporate identity" as a marketing-driven identity that is produced and expressed as a public symbolism for companies such as McDonald's, it cannot exclude that a re-defined concept and new definition of this term works also for other cultural contexts, and cannot become a vehicle of understanding the past. This is the point where archaeological terminology can become a promotor of "Translating the Past"; reaching non-archaeologists in the public with "messages from the past".

Aside from the mental barriers, which freshly introduced terms are often confronted with (in fact, it concerns more the new concepts behind the terms), we have another major and internal problem at the intersection of archaeological terminology / "Translating the Past". It relates to the academic habit of being able to easily transfer terms and the related concepts developed for particular contexts to other to similar cultural contexts, by ignoring the basic principles of cultural relativism. Here, i.e. in the other context, they do not really match, and they end up becoming ill-defined, unclear, mistakable, and unusable in the next cultural context. The result is academic confusion due to a non-reflected term use, as well as missing definition updates for the new contexts/ concepts; at the same time the introduction of a suitable new term and concept is neglected, too (e.g. the Big Men confusion).

Another hurdle should be mentioned for the junction terminology/ "Translating the Past". Since terminologies develop and function through permanent inter-, multi-, or transdisciplinary negotiation, they may become more complex and impossible to trace as more diverse disciplines get involved. As long as supra-disciplinary terminology work is established, and can succeed through long-term cooperation, solid ground is provided. Whenever more and new disciplines join in – and this is needed for the academic concepts of "Translating the Past" – terminological debates between disciplines may experience a very painful but beneficial enterprise (e.g. see below for the involvements of social neurobiology, human ethology, thanatology, and others).

Dimension 5: archaeological translation of the past

"Translating the Past" has to be considered as the ultimate task of archaeological work, and as a commitment for the common good.

This simple statement, and demand, is not self-evident at all and provokes several strikingly "flat" questions:

1) For whom is the translation needed; for what does the common good matter; and what has to be translated, or what is the translation's final purpose?
2) Does an archaeological "Translation of the Past" matter at all, and for what will it finally be of benefit? Provided that "Translating the Past" matters: doesn't history tell us that no generation learned from the previous ones, that failures and aberrations were always repeated since productive lifeways established, in one way or another?
3) What standards and agencies a "Translation of the Past" needs to have: who is translating, and will alternative translations be needed for addressing different target audiences for the same historical feature?
4) Why archaeological results cannot remain a dedication of archaeologists and commodities for an interested public? Why do we have to politicise archaeologies?

The demand – "Translating the Past" – neither rests in a self-righteous appeal, or a move to strengthen archaeologies' *raison d'être* by arguments relevant for the present and future, eventually to counter funding impacts; for sure, the demand is painfully idealistic.

Primarily, the demand is a matter of sanity and reason. Over time generations increasingly witness developments which fly in the face of reason, and the voices of the archaeologies are also required. Who, if not us archaeologists and historians, can translate the lessons from the past, or at least can become admonishers in the face of present developments?

"Translating the Past" appears to not be a universal demand; it is situational, aiming to target seemingly uncontrollable aggressive and complex macrostructures by the weak means of the humanities, and it is an idea from the western mind and thinking.[5] Our immediate and imperative professional task is, at least, to expose threats to mankind from history's point of view. The liability and commitment of archaeological – or, in general, historical – knowledge is shared by similar liabilities and commitments of the life sciences. Here, I see the need for closing the ranks with social neurobiology, human ethology, and especially with the environmental sciences: our "war" against nature has reached historically new, and in parts irreversible, dimensions.

However, "Translating the Past" is not only an ethical need and responsibility towards our future, and with regards to those who will follow us. It is generally owed to societies for strengthening the formation of their political wills, for sustainable decision-making and various other educational objectives.

So far, "Translating the Past" is a "bold", flat, and unspecified demand, and even not a concept. The required long-term discussion on its conceptualisation and cultural relativism can, hopefully, be a cleansing process for archaeological exchange, method, and theory. It would help to strengthen transdisciplinary competence and introduce a joint focus for the exchange of the disciplines' shared approaches.

At this initial stage, this contribution is far from the stage of presenting ideas about the methodological and epistemological means of how to translate the past. However, it establishes the arguments for an archaeological "Translation of the Past": see the general arguments in the previous paragraphs, and the following further positioning by comments and answers to Questions 1–4:

1) In addition to the general arguments presented before: "Translations of the Past" are not only owed – for the sake of mankind's present and future – to the public and its decision-makers; they are also needed for training and promoting the disciplines' understanding of history, dispositions, accountability, and terminological behaviour. This serves as holistic foci and ensures archaeological research remains connected, with the latter often being a severe problem. I would not restrict what has to be translated, as long as the purpose for us modern peoples is made transparent. Even findings, not necessarily claimable by "Big History" can be important, e.g. if a pottery specialist understands how historic social hierarchies functioned with pottery production and use, and how this can explain issues in modern societies.

At this point an important question should be raised: can "Translating the Past" – which is always a temporary and situational construction of subjective history – be manipulated or abused by political circles, for instance for present-day land claims or by ethnicity/ "racial" arguments? Dependant (in

5 We should always be reminded that "Translating the Past" is a matter of contextual subjectivity, and only successful if it fits with concepts of the past used in the targeted societies. Taxonomic thinking in such translations may not be received in societies with a predominantly metaphysic, "fatalistic" or meronomic understanding of time and the past.

terms of financing, ideology, administration) institutionalised archaeological research is vulnerable in this respect, not only in countries with obvious interests in such sorts of historiography. Direct exclusion, influence, and lobbying can take place against research via licencing, academic exchange, selective promotion, direct and indirect funding, etc., especially when heritage issues become involved. A second important question is how to behave in "Translating the Past" if it is going to hurt cultural dignity and integrity (traditions, religion, identities): is a cultural relativism approach really able to manage these (*sensu* the existence of multiple "truths" in "Translating the Past")? And furthermore, are all epistemological approaches suitable for "Translating the Past" when different traditional past and cultural concepts are involved; especially those that do not follow western taxonomical thinking?

While I imagine that all of these obstacles are plausible reasons as to why "Translating the Past" has not yet taken root on a wider scale, I also think that enough pressure has raised been from current aberrations to surmount them.

2) It appears evident that certain patterns and principles of aberrations and failures re-occur – seeming inevitable – in (pre-)history and that this is an ethological and ontological disposition and constant of mankind. These patterns and failures are an inherent and discursive subject in the philosophies of history, and are recorded since narrative writing exists. Provided that this is correct, does this free us from taking responsibility and action, ignoring the chances of the experienced immense progresses also made in history?

Any engagement in "Translating the Past" has at least a vague, or even solid, benefit for societies and the global community, but certainly cannot represent a sole factor for impetus. If more powerful influences – e.g. technological innovation, major impacts and disasters (*sic!*) – support and trigger cognitive adaptation for the better, it may turn out that the supposedly relatively weaker "Translating the Past" may have played its intellectual role in changes. "Translating the Past" may be most beneficial if it supports present cases where local awareness is prepared for its messages; but again, as witnessed in the current climate debate, supra-structural and complex aggregates may neutralise these efforts.

3) While the empirical data and substrata of a translation have to meet academic standards (verified and tested information channelled through the disciplines' methodological and epistemological frameworks; relying on holistic, supra-empirical, and systemic evaluations), the translation itself needs to be presented using a "sober" language and a "deconstructed complexity". All should be adapted to the comprehension frameworks of the target group and supported by archaeological facts related to the problem currently being addressed. The propagandistic power of evaluations and recommendations has to be controlled by archaeologists as much as possible, in order to exclude the predominantly negative experiences of "scientific journalism". Ideologically inspired translations, or a drift into sensational/emotional/superlative spheres would damage the credibility of an archaeological intervention. Topicality and competence in understanding the current aberrations and failures would be a must, as well as the appropriate choice and organisation of media. Alternative translations will be needed to respect different target groups and/or their cultural constitution.

In all that, the difference between knowledge of history and historicising knowledge is important to know and reflect upon (cf. e.g. Bernbeck 2009 and his example of distinguishing between "urban state emergence" and the "advent of public repression").

4) Why don't we need to politicise archaeologies? Should they really continue to produce a rather non-consulted and dramatically accelerating knowledge in books, meanwhile hardly being pursuable by the archaeologists themselves? Is personal passion, dedication and fun, together with some production of archaeological commodities for the public, a sufficient *raison d'être* of the archaeologies? Without "Translating the Past", isn't it better to have the materials preserved and resting in their sediments until new generations can better respect the past and translate its messages?

Afterword

This essay explains my decade-long experiences and struggle for an understanding of archaeological work beyond empiricism, passion, and dedication. Too often I met the disciplines' mere data orientation and limited responsibility/accountability to translate their historical meaning into lessons for the present and the future, including the avoidance of responsibility and advocacy in front of aberrations already known from history. During the end of my professional development I see "Translating the Past" as the essence and aim of any work in archaeology and history, knowing full well that I am part of a temporary and rather accidental framework of will and representation, *sensu* Schopenhauer. It was the foundation of the ex oriente research association at the Freie Universität Berlin which gave me the opportunity to develop and practise this alternative understanding of archaeology, as expressed in its projects of embedded archaeology, the advocacy for local heritage/community-based heritage management, the ultimate respect and support of the projects' host communities, or my agenda to identify the Neolithic ingrediencies and "legacy" in modern life (Gebel and Baumgarten 2012; Gebel 2014a; 2015; 2019). While I meanwhile value such explicit engagement as a form of applied archaeology, I am aware that this can, and will be taken by some – in the highly competitive archaeological research aggregates – as "non-scientific" or of a subjective matter.

This, in parts rather personal, essay chiefly addresses western archaeologists and western archaeological research, especially those active in the archaeologies of foreign states and nations. It understands archaeological research as part of the historical, anthropological, and cultural study frameworks, witnessing increasing elements and cooperation with the sciences.

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