EAZ Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift

Special issue
An Ontological Turn for Archaeology?
Novel Perspectives on Material, Practical, Political and Reflective Engagements
Edited by G. Di Maida and M. Porr

EAZ 59 (2), 2025. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54799/YTRQ8904 • CC-BY 4.0
Submitted: 15.01.2026 | Published: 23.01.2026

Introduction: An Ontological Turn for Archaeology? Novel Perspectives on Material, Practical, Political and Reflexive Engagements

Gianpiero Di Maida, Martin Porr

Keywords:
editorial, ontological turn, theoretical approaches, archaeology

Archaeology is rarely perceived as a key driver in the origins of the modern world or in the formation of modern globalized economic, social or cultural configurations. While it remains difficult to define what the modern world is, when it originated, or what a modern mindset may entail, there is nevertheless some justification for this view. Other factors are certainly more prominent, such as specific technological advancements (e.g., the steam engine), industrialization, colonialism and so on. However, archaeology also holds a special place in the emergence of these world-building processes, especially if we also consider dimensions of perception, attitudes and understandings. It is no coincidence that archaeology emerged as an independent endeavour in the 19th century, a period during which many cultural, social and intellectual foundations of modernity were established (Thomas 2004). The emerging discipline, for example, crystallized and reworked concepts of the linearity and uniformity of time, as well as ideas about how the contemporary world preserves layers of past events in different forms (Porr 2020; 2023). This mode of thinking influenced Sigmund Freud in his recasting of the nature of the human mind and the relationship between consciousness and the unconscious (Bowdler 1996). At least in metaphorical terms, archaeology thus participated in the modern ontological construction of human interiority itself.

For most of the 20th century, archaeology was aligned with major strands of Western thought, following variants of positivist science and a realist philosophical orientation. As such, it was also aligned with dominant public discourses and power structures (e.g., nationalism and ethnicity; see Jones 1997; Di Maida 2022). Many of these aspects were increasingly questioned and challenged with the emergence of so-called post-processualism from the 1980s onwards. The resulting discussions and debates interrogated both epistemological and institutional dimensions in ways that had not previously been addressed. These challenges more directly and openly recognized the interrelationship between power and knowledge.

Not surprisingly, these developments were fuelled and inspired by wider shifts in the global post-World War II political, economic and intellectual landscape, reflected in critical movements both within and beyond the Western world (Hodder 2012). Archaeologists could not ignore these developments and were compelled to respond in one way or another. While some resisted, others embraced the opportunities offered by a rapidly expanding body of critical scholarship, theoretical propositions and frameworks within sociology, anthropology, Indigenous studies, postcolonial and decolonial studies, philosophy, Science and Technology Studies (STS) and related fields. As a result, one could argue that although archaeology lost a degree of its original epistemological and institutional security and stability, it simultaneously gained a new openness to significant developments within the social sciences and

humanities. In doing so, archaeology also developed new social and public relevance.

Clearly, these developments have not been without controversy and critics. In recent years, archaeology has been accused of an excessive preoccupation with latest and most fashionable social theories, which are sometimes seen as little more than recycled versions of older ideas presented in a new form. Some have alleged that every few years a new 'turn' is proclaimed (the material turn, ontological turn, multispecies turn, etc.), each presented as urgently requiring the fundamental rewriting of large portions of the whole discipline. According to these critiques, this continuous invocation of novel approaches, revolutions as well as the above-mentioned turns serves to mask a theoretical void and a Sisyphean enterprise that gives the impression of movement while repeatedly returning to the same position (Lindstrøm 2015; Ribeiro 2016; Ribeiro/Giamakis 2023).

While one should certainly be sceptical of any claim that a single theoretical framework could ever provide an exhaustive explanation of the past or the present, there is certainly some validity to critiques of the recent proliferation of theoretical approaches in archaeology, which often seem to produce more academic attention than substantive insight. Looking beyond the discipline itself, this situation appears to be a product of wider social trends that can almost be described as a trademark of contemporary capitalist societies (Ribeiro/Di Maida forthcoming). Without doubt, there is increasing pressure for growth at all costs and for the constant production of 'novel' results or outputs: ideas are expected to be new, fresh and original, even when they are clearly derivative.

In this noisy, chaotic and crowded environment – where seemingly game-changing trends emerge every other day and rapidly obscure and challenge everything – it is hard to create the necessary space to distinguish genuinely productive turns and revolutions from passing fads. Under these circumstances, we as editors are particularly mindful of the need to navigate, on the one hand, proclamations of 'the next big thing' in archaeology and, on the other, careful assessments of theoretical approaches that have had demonstrably radical impacts and consequences, for example, in anthropology or sociology. In this spirit, we argue that a deeper engagement with a particular strand of recent anthropological thought is both justified and productive, because the issues under discussion are of direct relevance to any inquiry concerned with human action, thought as well as their material expressions.

Over the last quarter of a century, prominent strands of anthropology have experienced a radical change in theoretical approaches and orientations. The impact of this shift has proven to be so substantial that it continues to shake the very foundations of the discipline. This development, known as the '*ontological turn*,' is concerned with the notion of culture itself, which lies at the heart of all anthropological studies and inquiries (Kohn 2015; Viveiros de Castro 2015; Holbraad/Pedersen 2017).

The ontological turn argues that cultural differences are not the most significant distinctions between people and societies. It rejects the idea that different forms of knowledge relate to a single, shared world, with worldviews understood as just different perspectives on the same reality. Rather, it proposes that, depending on the cosmological systems into which actors are born, they construct the world in different ways. This overarching perspective is not limited to anthropological disciplines but resonates with developments in other fields that have recently taken a similar path (e.g., theoretical physics; Rovelli 2025).

Regardless of perspective, such a shift has been shown to have significant consequences at multiple levels. If relationships between actors and the world are variable and differently constituted by groups and individuals, then the stories that are told, the myths that are narrated, the relations that are formed, and the objects that are created do not merely reflect cultural differences – they are ontologically distinct. For archaeology, as a discipline primarily concerned with the study of past human communities and their material expressions, such a shift poses a vast number of challenges as well as opportunities.

Several aspects of the debates surrounding the ontological turn have already captured the interest of archaeologists, including the interrelationship between ontology and political power, expressions of 'art,' human–animal–other-than-human dynamics, the impact of Indigenous knowledges and the need to decolonize archaeological and anthropological thought and practices (Pétursdóttir/Olsen 2018; Crellin et al. 2020; Moro Abadía/Porr 2021). Through the respective engagements, archaeology has demonstrated that it is more than an academic spectator or passive recipient of theory; but it is also fully capable of developing its own theoretical and methodological contributions.

More importantly, we suggest that the investigations of past human groups and their material cultures greatly profit from a more extensive dialogue with the themes raised by the ontological turn. With its access to an extensive record of human diversity across space and time,

archaeology can contribute new and critical perspectives to several unresolved questions within the ontological debates. This applies, for example, to the extensive discussions aurrounding Philippe Descola's influential *Beyond Nature and Culture*, particularly following the publication of its English translation in 2013 (Descola 2013). Most recently, David Wengrow has advanced this argument in a comment published in Descola's latest book, *Politics of Worlding* (2025). Wengrow (2025) contends that archaeology must be part of this conversation not only because of its access to a wide range of evidence from humanity's past, but also because the past itself – and archaeology's own ontological assumptions – must become subjects of critical reflection (Porr 2021).

With this special issue, we propose an engagement with the ontological turn from a variety of archaeological perspectives, while also asking whether such a shift is indeed substantial and what role our discipline may play within this debate. Our idea was to bring together case studies from a range of archaeological contexts that, through the analysis of material culture, shed light on past ontological orientations by explicitly, critically and systematically working through the implications of the ontological turn.

Additionally, we sought to broaden this *miscellanea* beyond the study of past material expressions by specifically inviting for contributions that deal with the conceptualization of 'ontology in practice' – namely, studies that recognize the relevance of ontological considerations for contemporary archaeological practice in a broader sense of the term. In doing so, we extend the notion of archaeology toward questions of heritage, understood as the field in which we examine how archaeological evidence becomes meaningful in the present (Harrison 2018).

The following papers engage with different aspects of the themes outlined above, and we would like to thank all authors for their valuable contributions and insights, which make this special issue truly special.

- Benjamin Alberti (2025) investigates the issue of anthropomorphism in ceramic production during the first millennium AD in Northwest Argentina through the lens of alterity;
- Gianpiero Di Maida (2025) turns his attention to Neanderthals, seeking to overcome the *impasse* reached in the long-standing debate over their cognitive capacities and rather focusing on their being-in-the-world as inferred from the available archaeological record;
- Shumon T. Hussain (2025) engages with the topic of animal–human relations during the European Palaeolithic, extending the discussion beyond 'ontology' itself;
- Finally, André Tomás Santos (2026) builds on Philippe Descola's work and structuralist approaches to enter a taboo area in prehistoric art studies, introducing a new perspective in the attempt to assign a cosmological domain to the makers of much of Upper Palaeolithic art in Western Europe.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Editors-in-Chief for the opportunity to publish in EAZ as well as the managing editor, Anastasia Khramtsova, for her constant support and great patience along the way. Gianpiero Di Maida's research was funded by the *Niedersächsisches Ministerium für Wissenschaft und Kultur* [*tr*. Lower Saxony Ministry of Science and Culture] with funds from the *zukunft.niedersachsen* [*tr*. future.lower-saxony] programme of the *Volkswagen Stiftung* [*tr*. Volkswagen Foundation], grant number ZN3985. Martin Porr's current research is supported by the Australian Research Council Future Fellowship project *Deep Time Images in the Age of Globalization: Contemporary Heritage, Future Opportunities* (FT230100340) and by the University of Western Australia.

References

Alberti 2025: B. Alberti, Recursive archaeology: An ontological approach to interpreting anthropomorphic ceramics from Northwest Argentina. EAZ – Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift 59, 2, 2025. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54799/HSXU9635.

Bowdler 1996: S. Bowdler, Freud and archaeology. Anthropological Forum 7, 3, 1996, 419–438. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.1996.9967466.

Crellin et al. 2020: R. J. Crellin/C. N. Cipolla/L. M. Montgomery/O. J. T. Harris/S. V. Moore, Archaeological theory in dialogue: Situating relationality, ontology, posthumanism, and Indigenous paradigms (London–New York 2020).

Descola 2013: P. Descola, Beyond nature and culture (Chicago–London 2013).

Descola 2025: P. Descola, Politics of worlding: An anthropological contribution to cosmopolitics. The Berkeley Tanner lectures (Oxford 2025).

Di Maida 2022: G. Di Maida, Critique of lithic reason. Open Archaeology 8, 1, 2022, 1173–1182. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2022-0271.

Di Maida 2025: G. Di Maida, Becoming Neanderthal. EAZ – Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift 59, 2, 2025. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54799/KPOX9368.

Harrison 2018: R. Harrison, On heritage ontologies: Rethinking the material worlds of heritage. Anthropological Quarterly 91, 4, 2018, 1365–1384. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1353/anq.2018.0068.

Hodder 2012: I. Hodder (ed.), Archaeological theory today (Cambridge 2012).

Holbraad/Pedersen 2017: M. Holbraad/M. A. Pedersen, The ontological turn: An anthropological exposition (Cambridge 2017).

Hussain 2025: S. T. Hussain, Zoo-ontologies: Materiality and visuality in the multispecies tangle. EAZ – Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift 59, 2, 2025. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54799/ILVN5142.

Jones 1997: S. Jones, The archaeology of ethnicity: Constructing identities in the past and present (London–New York 1997).

Kohn 2015: E. Kohn, Anthropology of ontologies. Annual Review of Anthropology 44, 2015, 311–327. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-102214-014127.

Lindstrøm 2015: T. C. Lindstrøm, Agency "in itself." A discussion of inanimate, animal and human agency. Archaeological Dialogues 22, 2, 2015, 207–238. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203815000264.

Moro Abadía/Porr 2021: O. Moro Abadía/M. Porr (eds.), Ontologies of rock art: Images, relational approaches, and Indigenous knowledges (London–New York 2021).

Pétursdóttir/Olsen 2018: Þ. Pétursdóttir/B. Olsen, Theory adrift: The matter of archaeological theorizing. Journal of Social Archaeology 18, 1, 2018, 97–117. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605317737426.

Porr 2020: M. Porr, The temporality of humanity and the colonial landscape of the deep human past. In: M. Porr/J. M. Matthews (eds.), Interrogating human origins: Decolonisation and the deep human past (London–New York 2020) 184–207.

Porr 2021: M. Porr, Art, representation, and the ontology of images: Some considerations from the Wanjina Wunggurr tradition, Kimberley, Northwest Australia. In: O. Moro Abadía/M. Porr (eds.), Ontologies of rock art: Images, relational approaches, and Indigenous knowledges (London–New York 2021) 178–199.

Porr 2023: M. Porr, Digging into the human past: Archaeology, time, and the object. In: P. M. Dover (ed.), Engaging with the past and present: The relationship between past and present across the disciplines (London–New York 2023) 143–157.

Ribeiro 2016: A. Ribeiro, Archaeology will be just fine. Archaeological Dialogues 23, 2, 2016, 146–151. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203816000180.

Ribeiro/Di Maida forthcoming: A. Ribeiro/G. Di Maida, Archaeology and the *Zeitgeist*: Trends in our discipline today.

Ribeiro/Giamakis 2023: A. Ribeiro/C. Giamakis, On class and elitism in archaeology. Open Archaeology 9, 1, 2023, 20220309. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1515/opar-2022-0309.

Rovelli 2025: C. Rovelli, Sull'eguaglianza di tutte le cose: Lezioni americane (Milano 2025).

Santos 2026: A. T. Santos, Images and places in the Upper Palaeolithic of the Douro Basin, Iberian Peninsula: An ontological approach. EAZ – Ethnographisch-Archaeologische Zeitschrift 59, 2, 2026. DOI: https://doi.org/10.54799/OAKH4354.

Thomas 2004: J. Thomas, Archaeology and modernity (London–New York 2004).

Viveiros de Castro 2015: E. Viveiros de Castro, The relative native: Essays of Indigenous conceptual worlds (Chicago 2015).

Wengrow 2025: D. Wengrow, "Weapon of choice": Some archaeological reflections on cosmopolitics and Indigenous critiques of European culture. In: W. F. Hanks (ed.), P. Descola, Politics of worlding: An anthropological contribution to cosmopolitics (Oxford 2025) 181–190.

Gianpiero Di Maida
CCEHN – Lower Saxony State Office for Cultural Heritage
Hannover, Germany
gianpiero.dimaida@nld.niedersachsen.de

Martin Porr
University of Western Australia
Perth, Australia
martin.porr@uwa.edu.au