The Postmodern Predicament of Type-Thinking in Archaeology

Shumon Tobias Hussain ⓘ, **Felix Riede** and **Sébastien Plutniak** ⓘ *based on peer reviews by* **Miguel John Versluys**, **Gavin Lucas** *and* **Anna S. Beck**

"Hypercultural types: archaeological objects in fast times" by A. Ribeiro (1) offers some timely, critical and creative reflections on the manifold struggles of and disappointments in type-thinking and typological approaches in recent archaeological scholarship. Ribeiro insightfully situates what has been identified as a "crisis" in archaeological typo-praxis in the historical conditions of postmodernity and late capitalism themselves. The author thereby attempts what he himself considers "quite hard", namely "to understand the current *Zeitgeist* and how it affects how we think and do archaeology" (p. 4). This provides a sort of *historical epistemology of the present* which can of course only be preliminary and incomplete as it crystallizes, takes shape, and transforms as we write these lines, is available only in fragments and hints, and is generally difficult to talk about and describe as we (the author included) lack critical distance – present-day archaeologists and fellow academics are both enfolded in postmodernity and continue to contribute to its logics and trajectories. Ribeiro's key argument is provocative as it is interesting: he contends that archaeologists' difficulties of coming to terms with types and typologies – staple knowledge practices of the discipline ever since – are a symptom of the changing *cultural matrix* of our times.

The diagnosis is multilayered and complex, and Ribeiro at times only scratches the surface of what may be at stake here as he openly admits himself. At the core of his proposal is a shift in attention away from classical questions of epistemological rank, which in archaeology have tended to orbit the contentious issue of the reality of types (see also 2). Instead of foregrounding the question of type-realities – whether types, once identified, can be meaningfully said to exist and to represent something significant in the world – archaeologists are urged to recognize that typo-praxis is culturally saturated in at least two profound ways. First, devising and mobilizing types and typologies is a cultural practice itself – it may indeed have long been a foundational 'cultural technique' (*Kulturtechnik*) (3) of archaeology as a disciplined community-venture of methodical knowledge production.

Typo-centric understandings of the archaeological record are quite akin to definition-centric apprehensions of the same as in both cases order, discreteness, and one-to-one correspondence are considered overriding epistemic virtues and credible pointers to a subject-independent "reality". As such, these practices have a *location* of their own and they may thus notably conflict with the particularities of alternate and ever-mutating phenomenal realities and historical conditions. Discreteness may for instance lose its paradigmatic status as a descriptor of worldly order, and this is precisely what Ribeiro argues to have happened in the wake of postmodern transformations, influentially said to have deeply reconfigured the relation between the local and the global, at times even superseding such distinctions altogether. When coupled to questions of reality, types, in a similar fashion as definitions, quickly become vehicles to affirm epistemic power and knowledge authority and so help certify certain kinds of realities while supressing others. This is the paradox of modernity: to insist on monolithic understandings of the world while professing radical difference.

Second, and for Ribeiro more importantly, typo-praxis is not just subject to cultural variation and thus by implication is plural, it also always has its proper associated *cultural milieu* in which it exerts some sort of efficacy, i.e. enables action and insight. Ribeiro maintains that this sort of efficacy has become contentious under postmodern conditions and this is because culture, under the gaze of global consumerism, has lost much of its classical significance, and as "hyperculture" (4) developed new logics, significations, and material culture correspondences, essentially "flattening" the highly textured and differentiated world of modernity (p. 6). Some of these new configurations sharply violate the expectations of traditional views of culture. The postmodern situation has in this way effectively emerged as a *resistant force* proffering much caution and growing scepticism among archaeologists and other academics alike as received ideas about "types" and "cultures" do not seem to work anymore the same way as before. The *credibility* of different modes of typo-praxis, archaeological or not, in other words, may depend much more on the cultural ecology of lived experience and contemporary diagnosis than is often realized. With Ribeiro, we may say that culture concepts and type concepts are indeed *co-constitutive*, and what sort of types and typologies archaeologists can persuasively deploy thus also depends greatly on how we construct the link between culture and type, and how (well) we grapple with our own realities and the lessons we draw from them – yet another important reminder of how our own subjectivities figure in such foundational debates (see esp. 5).

The crisis of typo-praxis in archaeology, then, is intricately linked to the crisis of modernity, broached by Ribeiro with the labels of postmodernity and late capitalism. Upon reflection, this is not surprising at all since Tylor's (6) influential definition of culture for example, which is extensively referenced in the paper, was both reflective of and conducive to the project of modernity and its distinctive historical formations such as empire and colonialism. Ribeiro reminds us that questions of justification and credibility, be it in the domain of type-thinking or other epistemic contexts, can never be fully divorced from the contemporary situation, and archaeologists thus need to be vigilant observers of the present, too. Typo-praxis ultimately is motivated by and draws authority from what Foucault (7) has called *épistémè*, the totality of pertinent parameters forming the historical *a priori* of understanding or the guiding unconsciousness of subjectivity within a given epoch. The crisis of archaeological typo-praxis, in this view, signifies a calling into question of the historical *a priori* on which much traditional type-work in archaeology was premised. Archaeologists still have to come to terms with the implications and consequences of this assessment. "Hypercultural types: archaeological objects in fast times" offers a first poignant analysis of some of these challenges of postmodern archaeological type-thinking.

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Reviews

Evaluation round #1

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Decision by **Shumon Tobias Hussain**, **Felix Riede** and **Sébastien Plutniak** , posted 31 March 2024, validated 31 March 2024

Invitation to revise your preprint

Dear Artur,

thank you again for submitting this interesting paper for our upcoming edited volume on type concepts and typological thinking in archaeology.

The reviews of your paper are now available and you can read them in detail below.

As you will see, they are all very positive about the paper as a whole, including the perspective(s) it advocates and the discussions it affords. The reviewers also offer some important critical comments, however, and these should be addressed before publication. They mainly relate to the two core concepts of your paper - typology and culture - as these should probably be more clearly defined and their relationship clarified.

When you upload your revised preprint, please also include a point-by-point response letter to document how you have engaged with the reviewer's comments.

We look forward to your revisions and thanks again for contributing to our volume.

Best regards,

Shumon on behalf of the editorial team

Reviewed by **Miguel John Versluys**, 11 March 2024

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Reviewed by **Anna S. Beck**, 31 March 2024

This is an interesting and thought-provoking paper. It takes up a well-known but still relevant discussion in archaeology - the relationship between culture and typologies - and brings new perspectives into it. The concept of hyperculture is presented which brings the traditional archaeological discussion in touch with the

understanding of cultural processes in modern society and adds in that way complexity to the field.

Despite being discussed many times in the history of archaeology, typology is still a very under-theorized approach and the methods behind it are often implicit. However, we use them more or less consciously all the time and therefore we should discuss the methods and purposes of making them much more. Also for that reason, this paper is welcomed.

The examples used in the paper are interesting and relatable and mostly they work well to illustrate the points of the paper. In the example of the samurai sword, would it not be relevant to include a mention of object biographies here? A samurai sword from the 17th century is not the same as a modern one (I guess) - the narratives are different (and therefore also the market price). Would that add something to the example to include that aspect? In the chopstick example (l. 324-340) I think it would work better if it was more explicit that the difficulties are particularly related to a monotheistic view of culture. In the examples of airports (l. 384-388) and Apple products (l. 413-419), I think they make use of stereotypes in a way that might be too simplistic to what they are used to illustrate - or maybe that is exactly the point?! I would also have liked the example of the EDC to be more developed as that is a really interesting example, at least illustrated with a few more images?

Despite the interesting perspectives and inspiring discussion that the paper opens up, I have two issues with the paper that I hope the author will take a look at:

1)   The concept of typology. In my opinion, the concept of typology needs to be further developed in the paper. What is "typology" in the context of this paper? Typologies can be shaped in many different ways depending on the purpose they serve. At least for some archaeologists, typology is not something inherent in the archaeological record but a tool used to describe similarities and variations. Depending on the scale and the choice of attributes, the typology can be made to show different cultural processes. Maybe a more developed presentation of the Ford/Spaulding discussion would make up for this lack?

2)   As I see it, the paper loses part of its focus towards the end of part 3 where the discussion is widened up and eg. consumer culture is included in the discussion. Not that it might not be relevant to bring in new perspectives, but I miss a more explicit and clear connection back to the original discussion of the paper - the relationship between culture and typology. What does it mean to how we understand what the archaeological/material record is an expression of? I like the conclusion that we need to work with different concepts of culture at the same time depending on the phenomenon that is studied but what consequences does it have to how we work with typology in the future? Or how do we work with typologies in multiple ways? Maybe more focus on the actual purpose of the typology? What can typologies then contribute (if anything) to an understanding of the processes of hyperculture?

More practical notes:

When talking about "culture" in l. 316 - is that culture in the modern world or the concept of culture that has become more complex? I hope for the last…

Furholt 2017 = Furholt 2018 ?
Augé 2023 [1935] = Auge 2023 [1995]?

It would have been helpful to know more about the context of the paper. It seems to be part of a larger whole

and therefore some of the issues pointed out might be solved in other parts of the volume.

Reviewed by Gavin Lucas, 14 February 2024

This is an interesting paper that raises a lot of questions. But I think the core argument needs to be tightened up to make it more convincing. The paper addresses the link between the type concept and culture concept, and this is a really crucial link that certainly needs to be unravelled – especially in the light of changing conceptions of culture. But one of the weaknesses of the paper is that it mostly focuses on the problems of the culture concept without properly bringing this back to its impact or relation to typology even if it touches on this at certain points. These points of contact need to be developed and pushed more – perhaps in a more meaty conclusion.

Since the core of the paper addresses the culture concept, I will devote most of my comments there. There are two central sections to the paper in this regard: the 'Death of Culture' and 'Hyperculture and the typology of objects'. The split here is not very convincing. The first section outlines the case for the demise of the culture concept in the late 20th century – with which I completely agree; but then segues this with views about the homogenization or flattening of culture under late capitalism/postmodernity. This part I found harder to agree with. Thus the example of the Samurai sword really doesn't work as it is offered as an example of how objects today are not tied to specific cultures – only to be admitted at the end that, yes, they do still have connotations of Japanese-ness, but then this is reversed again, when it is claimed that a samurai sword and an Arab scimitar are in the end, interchangeable. I think the paper confuses the commodification of these objects with their cultural meanings (see Kopytoff's classic paper on singularization in the *Social Life of Things*). To a collector, it matters very much which is which, just as it might matter to a Samurai warrior. But for different reasons. The cultural meaning of the object has just been transformed, not erased or flattened (also see Boltanski's more recent work on *Enrichment* here for how objects enter different value systems as commodities).

Thus while elements of this flattening of culture might have some purchase, the general tone does not match my reading, where such views were almost immediately critiqued by most academics as superficial. The whole globalization and McDonaldization of culture (á la Ritter) was heavily contested by others who stressed the local inflections of global culture (e.g. Miller). And of course in the next section, these very points (including Miller on coca-cola) are raised, which makes me wonder why the argument had to proceed like this. It felt as if the paper wanted to construct a straw man, only to demolish it later – but this straw man was blown over in the 1980s and so the paper is only arguing against a pile of straw. Which unfortunately takes a way a lot of the impact of the subsequent argument. Indeed, exactly the same happens when Clarke and his notion of polythetic culture is discussed. This is even older and I don't think the paper is well served by bringing these points in so late in the argument as if they are new rebuttals to the homogeneous nature of culture. All of these issues would be better raised much earlier to pre-empt the kind of responses I had when reading (indeed, several times I found myself saying, 'yes but what about so-and-so', only to read exactly about 'so-and-so' a few pages later). I think some thoughtful re-structuring of what goes in which section would really help the flow of the argument of this paper.

For me, the really central pivot of the paper comes right at the end in the concluding discussion (lines 493-7) where it states the paradox of archaeology wanting to jettison notion of culture yet still relying on it. I think this should be a key point which acts to pivot between the death of culture and the discussion of hyperculture, because it raises the issue of how we should address this paradox. And the paper does provide the suggestion of an answer when it argues for the notion of multiple concepts of culture (on lines 351-2). To me, this is also when the paper starts to say something important and where Han's concept of hyperculture has purchase. Reading between the lines, the question becomes if a culture is defined as a community or shared set of practices, then how do these cohere when they are not bound to a place (as in the traditional notion)? Indeed, even if you define culture as polythetic, as a constellation or assemblage of practices it still begs the question of what enables these to cohere or hang together. Despite the strong assertion that an archaeological culture

could not be equated with ethnicity or language etc – as the paper reminds us in the introduction – there is still an assumed unity which is based on the same thing as ethnicity etc – namely a community bound together by a place and time. As the paper's discussion of hyperculture makes clear though, this need not be so. Indeed, what hyperculture (or in fact, just the contemporary culture of late capitalism) shows is how *consumption* becomes a way to forge shared practices and thus, what you might call, sub-cultures. And again, the paper cites the work of Baudrillard here and quite rightly – his *System of Objects* and other books on consumption that came out in the late 1960s and early 1970s demonstrate how objects can create communities of shared practice through the typological qualities of objects. But – and here is where the paper missed a step – these typologies were not based on cultural traditions in the Tylorian sense, but the creation of brand and corporate identities *through design*. Thus when the paper discusses IKEA and Apple products (lines 400-5), there is a typology here - just not one based on traditional anthropological notions, but those of corporate identity and brand name. This is exactly what Baudrillard referred to in his discussion of serial objects. These then become the means for consumers to identify themselves through sharing the same constellation of objects – neatly illustrated in the example of EDC. In this way, I think the paper could have also had a way to link the culture concept back to typology which, as I mentioned in my opening comments, was never properly done.

In regard to the plurality of concepts of culture though, I have one final remark. To some extent, the culture concept always had a dual nature – one being the Tylorian notion of a set of customs etc, but the other is the 19th century Arnoldian idea of culture as civilizing or improving, something you could have 'more' or 'less' of (a strong hint of which remains in Tylor of course). To some extent, the Arnoldian concept was re-dressed in the Marxist literature of the 1960s-80s as a class-based concept of culture (e.g. Bourdieu's book *Distinction* addressed this, but also generally, the rise of Cultural Studies as an academic discipline) and while I am not necessarily suggesting a link between this kind of elite culture and Hyperculture (though one can be made as the paper alludes to through its association with a metropolitan, mobile elite), there is certainly a sense that the class-based approaches to consumption and objects already prefigured a notion of culture as not place-based. 'Cultures of consumption' or 'consumer cultures' was not only plural, it also worked off a very different concept of culture to the anthropological, one closer to Han's notion of hyperculture (which in some ways, I would suggest, is largely derivative of this literature. But that is just my opinion!). I can certainly think of archaeological examples of this, where specific artefact types are linked to a specific sub-cultural classes (e.g. Gaimster's work on the 16th and 17th c. Hanse and Folkegrupper pottery). These bear no resemblance to the traditional notion of culture in archaeology.

In summary, I think the paper makes some really important observations on the way our changing understanding of culture ought to impact our understanding of types, but the specific links between culture and type concept could be developed in more detail and especially, the implications of the changing concept of culture for the concept of typology.