



HARMAN, GRAHAM, AND CHRISTOPHER WITMORE, 2023, *Objects Untimely: Object-Oriented Philosophy and Archaeology*, Cambridge and Hoboken: Polity Press, 240 pp., ISBN 978-1-509-55655-7

In *Objects Untimely* Graham Harman and Christopher Witmore propose an interdisciplinary intervention that reconfigures contemporary understandings of the relationships among objects, temporality, and archaeological interpretation. Instead of treating objects as passive leftovers of history or as things swept along in endless flux, the authors argue that objects themselves actively create time. Their central research question challenges the dominant temporal paradigms in both philosophical and archaeological discourse: How might objects be reconceptualized—not as passive epiphenomena of historical processes or entities dissolved in ceaseless flux, but as autonomous agents that actively engender temporality?

Drawing on Harman's object-oriented ontology, a metaphysical framework that affirms the independent existence of real objects and their systematic withdrawal from exhaustive relational capture, the authors claim that real objects exist independently and that time is something that emerges from them, not the other way around. This idea challenges what New Materialism and process philosophy indebted to Whitehead and Deleuze, and it also questions the linear timelines of archaeology's linear chronologies, institutionalized in the nineteenth century by Pitt Rivers and Flinders Petrie. The book offers a fresh alternative rooted in speculative realism, and it's worth scholarly attention from anyone working across anthropology, archaeology, and philosophy.

The authors ground their argument in the material remains of the ancient Mediterranean—especially the layered ruins at Corinth, Mycenae, and Troy. These sites aren't just examples; they function as active participants, pushing back against the chronologies scholars usually impose. Ceramic sherds, architectural fragments, and inscriptions refuse to stay neatly in their assigned periods. The book traces a long philosophical line from Aristotle substance metaphysics and al-

Ash'ari occasionalism through Bergson and Whitehead, showing how “surface tensions” between objects and their qualities keep generating alternative ways of experiencing time—retroactive, topological, cyclical, even generational. These ideas directly challenge the hegemony of linear historicism that has dominated archaeological thinking for so long.

The central questions grow out of the tension between Harman's withdrawal-based metaphysics and Witmore's archaeological sensibility of material temporality. If objects are truly generative, what other temporal frameworks become possible? How should archaeology rethink its own foundations once it stops treating things as mere evidence of past events? The authors engage with the ontological turn in anthropology and posthumanist archaeology, calling for a deeper ontological re-foundation of the discipline. In short, they want us to re-conceptualize the relationship between things and time by not asking only “what happened here?” but to start asking what objects themselves are doing across time.

The method is deliberately hybrid, intentionally refusing sharp divisions between philosophical speculation and archaeological empiricism. There's no new fieldwork; instead, Harman and Witmore revisit well-known Mediterranean sites with close readings of objects and assemblages, through fresh theoretical lenses. They treat objects and assemblages as places where theory gets tested and transformed. The writing moves fluidly between close material description and philosophical speculation, always staying grounded in the actual archaeological record. Particular emphasis falls on the ways objects “push back” against imposed temporal narratives, asserting their endurance, partial withdrawal from relational capture, and capacity to generate effects that exceed human intentionality. The book bridges continental metaphysics and empirical archaeology, while remaining attentive to the evidentiary constraints of the archaeological record and the ethical responsibilities of contemporary practitioners. This balance is one of the book's real strengths, being both synthetic and speculative, it never loses sight of the things themselves while still pushing substantial theoretical claims.

What emerges is a clear reversal: objects generate time rather than simply being placed inside it. Archaeological moments become “untimely.” Mycenaean ruins ripple backward and forward, reshaping later interpretations. Corinthian deposits spill across period boundaries. At Troy, Homeric myth and Schliemann's excavations fold into each other topologically. Objects keep a persistent “surface tension” with their own qualities, creating countercurrents that refuse to be

explained away by their original historical context, challenging the historicist assumption that every artifact must be explained solely by its original temporal context. These findings open up real space for non-linear, object-centered temporalities that conventional chronology has long pushed to the margins.

The core claim is straightforward but powerful: objects are not inert matter waiting for humans to give them meaning. They actively produce temporality. This forces a shift in how we understand archaeology itself. It demands a fundamental revision of the discipline's self-understanding as the reconstruction of past events, toward following the independent careers of things, their withdrawals, alliances, and long-range effects. The authors build on and extend Alfred Gell's theory of art and agency, giving object agency in a deeper ontological realism while insisting that time is ultimately an effect of object relations. The result is a vision of archaeology as a speculative science of objects, not just a historicist science of events with implications for how practitioners engage the material record and conceptualize their own disciplinary identity.

The implications reach well beyond Mediterranean archaeology. The book gives the ontological turn in anthropology a sharper metaphysical edge by showing how object-oriented ontology (OOO) can illuminate the temporal lives of archaeological objects. Speaking directly to current conversations about deep time, non-human agency, and the Anthropocene, it also opens doors to Indigenous philosophies of time and matter that have never been bound by linear frameworks. Future work could apply these ideas more broadly to include the systematic application of OOO to global archaeological contexts, develop digital tools for modeling object-generated temporalities, or rethink heritage ethics once we start seeing objects as active memory-makers rather than passive records.

Overall, the book hangs together remarkably well. Its strength lies in the way it brings object-oriented ontology and archaeological practice into genuine conversation without forcing either side to give up its core commitments. The writing is clear, the case studies are evocative, and the theoretical payoff is substantial. Some readers may find the philosophical language dense at times, and the Mediterranean focus leaves room for more global case studies. Still, this is a field-advancing book that will keep scholars talking about archaeology's ontological foundations and the nature of time for a long time to come.

Notes

1. Readers interested in the full development of Harman's object-oriented ontology and its archaeological implications should consult the book's opening chapters, particularly chapters 1 and 4.

References

Gell, Alfred. 1998. *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

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