

Outstanding Contributions to Archaeology

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The Poznań School of Archaeology

The Origin, Growth and Significance

Outstanding Contributions to Archaeology

Series Editor

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The Poznań School of Archaeology

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Springer

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The Poznań School of Archaeology: An Outline



Arkadiusz Marciniak, Michał Pawleta, and Włodzimierz Rączkowski

Abstract The chapter serves as an introduction to a volume dedicated to the Poznań School of Archaeology (PSA), which is the most distinctive, original, and rigorous school of archaeological thought in Poland, developed after the Second World War. Emerging in the 1970s from the Poznań School of Methodology, the PSA has been continuously practiced by three generations of archaeologists. The chapter details the core philosophical and methodological tenets defining the PSA such as a rigorous epistemology, a systematic and explicitly designed methodology, rejection of simplistic functional explanations. It stresses the School emphasis on the leading role of theory in scientific research, and promotion of interdisciplinary collaboration. The chapter further presents several key concepts and influences from its intellectual roots in the Poznań School of Methodology, including idealizational theory of science, humanistic interpretation, socio-regulative theory of culture, functional-genetic explanation, and logical reconstruction. The chapter concludes by presenting major figures responsible for the emergence of Poznań School of Archaeology, in particular Jan Źak, Stanisław Tabaczyński, Danuta Minta-Tworzowska, and Anna Pałubicka.

Keywords Poznań School of Methodology · History of archaeological thought · Methodology · Epistemology · Socio-regulative theory of culture · Idealizational theory of science

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1 Introduction

Schools of research are defined by distinct and coherent ways of understanding the reality under study, an explicitly defined epistemology and corresponding methodologies. In Knud E. Jørgensen's (2015, 1) words, they also imply "broad trajectories of scholarship, distinct dialectics of continuity and change as well as the gradual establishment of a scholarly infrastructure". The milieu of their promoters and practitioners is characterised by their shared research questions, the means of their analysis, including the choice of methods, the character of the research process and the nature of the explanations sought. Various research traditions imply different assumptions and diverse ways of looking at measurement and social science research. Research traditions provide the general framework within which more specific analytical interventions take place, thereby constituting a field of study.

The Poznań School of Archaeology is the most distinctive, original and rigorous school of archaeological thought in Poland that developed after the Second World War. It developed in the milieu of academic archaeology in Poznań in the 1970s and has been continuously practised by three generations of archaeologists. It emerged in the tradition of the Poznań School of Methodology (hereinafter referred to as PSM), adopting its various elements as manifested in the works of its main founders, including Jerzy Kmita, Leszek Nowak and Jerzy Topolski. It is characterised by the rigorous epistemology developed within the framework of Leszek Nowak's idealised conception of science and Jerzy Kmita's humanistic interpretation and socio-regulatory theory of culture. It is characterised by a rigorous and explicitly designed methodology as an intrinsic element of any archaeological endeavour, and an explicit and multifaceted interest in the nature of the archaeological process. It proposed an insight rooted in Marxism but offered an expanded epistemology. It rejected the simplistic functional and rigid deductive-nomological explanations but remained structural. It focused on historical epistemology, non-Marxist historical materialism and the original concept of culture. In the following decades, it also incorporated various elements of major research schools, especially from the Anglo-Saxon area, and tried to integrate elements of these schools into the tradition that originally constituted the Poznań School of Archaeology.

Among the most important facets of the Poznań School of Archaeology are the intellectual roots and the origin of the discipline of archaeology, the character of archaeological evidence, the conceptualisation of spatial behaviour and the religious and symbolic character of human groups, the social context of practising archaeology, and the meta-reflection of archaeology's presence in the contemporary world and its future. It has also been institutionalised, in particular in the form of the Department of History and Methodology of Prahistory at the Institute of Prahistory, student conferences organised by members of the Poznań School of Archaeology, seminars, conferences and most recently the Poznań Academic Archaeology Seminars (PASA). These achievements translated themselves into a commonly held opinion about the methodological strength of academic training at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań. Over the decades it developed into an original

school of archaeological thought, embedded in the research traditions of cultural studies, philosophy, history and the natural sciences. It became the only distinct school of archaeological thought in Poland. It made Poznań the dominant research centre in archaeological theory and methodology, continuously setting the agenda in the country.

One of the foremost proponents of the Poznań School of Archaeology is Danuta Minta-Tworzowska. She has played a pivotal role in shaping and advancing the School's intellectual direction. By attending seminars conducted by Jerzy Kmita, she became well-versed in the foundational ideas of the PSM, which profoundly influenced her approach to archaeology. Minta-Tworzowska not only absorbed these ideas but also innovatively applied them to the context of Polish archaeology. Her extensive works on the theory and methodology of archaeology (Żak and Minta-Tworzowska 1991; Minta-Tworzowska 1996, 2000a, 2002, 2006, 2015, 2017, 2021a, 2022), classification and typology as reflections on research procedures (Minta-Tworzowska 1994), the conceptualization of archaeological sources (Minta-Tworzowska 1998a, 2000b), and the study of symbols and symbolism in archaeological research (Minta-Tworzowska 2000c, 2008, 2019) have led to the development of a unique approach to archaeological methodology, significantly strengthening the theoretical foundations of Polish archaeology. Her rigorous scholarship and dedication embody the values of the Poznań School of Archaeology, establishing her as a central figure in its history and ongoing success.

The Poznań School of Archaeology is one of the European traditions of archaeological thought, relatively unknown to the wider research community. Evžen Neustupný (1997/1998) almost 30 years ago would classify it as a minority archaeology, mainly because of its negligible impact on world archaeology. The potential impact has also been undermined by several factors: a relatively small community of its practitioners, the use of the Polish language in publications, a relatively low level of institutionalisation, and the dominance of the cultural-historical school imposed on the structure of Polish archaeology, including the educational system. Additionally, political impositions and the use of the German tradition as a means of developing and strengthening the role of some archaeologists have also played a role.

However, the division of research traditions into minority and majority, as proposed by Neustupný, is no longer viable in the period of the post-paradigm phase in the history of archaeological thought and an increasing democratisation of academic practices. Furthermore, the Poznań School of Archaeology contradicts Neustupný's thesis that archaeology in the countries of Central Europe historically developed within the milieu of the German tradition. The School itself, as well as other research traditions in Polish archaeology, such as bioarchaeology (Marciniak 2015, 2018) and ethnoarchaeology (Kobyliński 2012; Marciniak and Yalman 2013), developed independently of German intellectual currents. The Poznań School of Archaeology must therefore be seen as a distinct, original and powerful mode of archaeological practice, and as such an important element of European archaeological thought.

2 The Theoretical and Methodological Context of the Poznań School of Archaeology

The Poznań School of Archaeology developed within the framework of the Poznań School of Methodology. The latter is a philosophical and scientific movement known for its significant and original contributions to the philosophy and methodology of science. It emerged as a post-war trend in Polish philosophy and methodology that rejected the so-called “humanistic interpretation of Marxism” and aimed to incorporate elements of positivism and the achievements of the Lviv-Warsaw School into Marxist philosophy. The PSM focused on epistemological and methodological issues of science, with a particular interest in historical epistemology, the methodology of the humanities and their philosophical foundations, considered from a Marxist point of view using analytical methods.

The PSM has made significant contributions to the philosophy of science, particularly in the areas of theory confirmation, scientific explanation, and the structure of scientific theories. It has investigated how scientific knowledge is developed, justified and structured. Since its theoretical foundations have been discussed in detail elsewhere (e.g. Kotowa 2010; Zamiara 2010; Musiał 2016), and in the chapters of this volume (Brzechczyn, chapter “[Poznań School of Methodology: Institutional History – Research Program – Main Achievements](#)”; Grad, chapter “[The Poznań School of Methodology and Its Continuations](#)”), we will only briefly highlight the elements that are important from the perspective of the development of the Poznań School of Archaeology.

The PSM emerged at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań and was centred around a group of eminent researchers. Its first pillar was Marxist philosophy, but not in the form of official Marxism, as a reference to the writings of Marx himself. The second pillar was the philosophy of science, combining the influences of Karl Popper and Kazimierz Ajdukiewicz. The third was the German anti-naturalist methodology of the humanities, such as Wilhelm Dilthey and Max Weber. These different currents, previously seen as antagonistic, became a source of originality for the school, but eventually led to its division. In the 1970s, some researchers around Leszek Nowak focused on the idealizational theory of science (Nowak 1980). At the same time, other researchers associated with Jerzy Kmita concentrated on the methodological foundations of the humanities, developing the concept of humanistic interpretation and later the socio-regulatory concept of culture (e.g. Kmita 1971, 1973). These were further strengthened by Jan Such and his collaborators, who studied the Marxist-dialectical characteristics of the scientific worldview.

Although the various facets of the PSM developed differently, it maintained the original line of thought and methodological project, based on several theoretical and cognitive foundations. As Jan Grad (chapter “[The Poznań School of Methodology and Its Continuations](#)”) notes, the most distinctive elements of this research tradition included the application of cognitive categories such as the premise of

rationality, humanistic interpretation, idealization, logical reconstruction, and functional-genetic explanation.

Firstly, the PSM emphasises the importance of empirical and formal methods in scientific research and advocates a rigorous approach to the study of scientific methods and the logical structure of scientific theories. Secondly, it focuses on the logical analysis of scientific language and theories. This involves studying the logical syntax and semantics of scientific statements and theories to clarify their meaning and structure. Thirdly, it pursues ‘logical reconstruction’, which involves the identification of various assumed and often unrecognised premises and theoretical underpinnings of the research process, and recognising their impact on the results obtained. It has been recognised as a powerful methodological tool for understanding and evaluating theories across disciplines. By focusing on the rational core and ensuring systematic coherence, logical reconstruction enhances epistemological clarity and promotes interdisciplinary collaboration. For this reason, the PSM promotes an interdisciplinary approach to methodological problems, integrating various fields of science such as philosophy, logic, mathematics and natural sciences. Fourth, the Poznań School of Methodology advocates the concept of humanistic interpretation, which seeks to bridge the gap between the natural sciences and the humanities. This concept represents a sophisticated and nuanced approach to understanding human culture. Finally, the School introduced the socio-regulatory theory of culture, which provides a comprehensive understanding of how culture functions as a regulatory system within society. It emphasises the importance of norms and regulations in maintaining social order and the adaptive nature of culture in response to changing circumstances of its persistence. This concept has been successfully adopted by archaeologists.

The concept of humanistic interpretation is one of the main achievements and characteristic features of the PSM. It emphasises the importance of context, meaning and intentionality, and advocates a methodology that respects the unique qualities of human cultural phenomena. It takes the form of a subjective-rational explanation. It assumes the rationality of human action and relies on deduction, where the conclusion must follow logically from the premises. It challenges the dominance of positivist methodologies and offers a richer, more empathetic understanding of human action and creation. While it departs from heuristic relativism, it is similar to inference in the natural sciences. The mechanism of objectifying knowledge itself is also similar to that of the natural sciences.

The PSM has had a lasting impact on the philosophy of science in the Polish social sciences and humanities. It has influenced various fields, including the methodology of empirical sciences, the theory of language, and the philosophy of social sciences. Its emphasis on rigorous analysis and interdisciplinary research continues to inspire contemporary philosophical and scientific inquiry. It has also influenced archaeology and inspired archaeologists.

3 The Emergence of the Poznań School of Archaeology

The PSM had a profound influence on Polish archaeologists, mainly based in Poznań and working at the Adam Mickiewicz University and the Polish Academy of Sciences. Its influence on the discipline of archaeology was mainly inspired by the work of the philosophers Jerzy Kmita and Leszek Nowak and the historian Jerzy Topolski.

The foundations of the Poznań School of Archaeology were laid by the distinguished prehistorian and medievalist Jan Źak (1923–1990). He was strongly opposed to positivist archaeology in its evolutionist-diffusionist version, which was associated with the dominant cultural-historical approach. Consequently, he turned to the Poznań School of Methodology, which was growing dynamically at the time, as the only alternative to positivism in Poland at the time. He aimed to bring the insights and findings of the philosophers of this school into the field of Polish archaeology. This included the main tenets of the Poznań Methodological School, such as humanistic interpretation, functional-genetic explanation and the idealizational concept of science. He aimed to modernise archaeology and establish it as an academic discipline based on a rigorous methodological framework and an explicit and in-depth theoretical foundation (Minta-Tworzowska 2001, 2023).

Źak was particularly inspired by Jerzy Kmita and wanted to introduce a concept of humanistic interpretation into archaeology. He advocated its heuristic potential for explaining various phenomena of the past, both synchronically and diachronically. His main research interests were the Early Middle Ages in Scandinavia, the ethnogenesis of the Slavs and settlement studies, a field in which empirical research dominated the archaeology of his times. In particular, he attempted to apply this concept to the study of the continuity or discontinuity of the Slavs' presence concerning their economic position in the fifth and sixth centuries AD (Źak 1974, 1975b, 1985). Źak also stressed the importance of the functional genetic method in explaining the historical consciousness of prehistoric societies (Źak 1975a). He used this framework to explain this way of thinking among hunter-gatherer societies in the Mediterranean area. He saw the consciousness of these communities as both a reflection of their living conditions and a regulator of their lives, intertwined with clan and tribal institutions, and described it as naïve-naturalistic.

Źak was not only a vivid advocate of the ideas developed by the PSM, but also made an important contribution to the institutionalisation of these efforts. As a result, in 1982 the Department of History and Methodology of Prehistory was established at the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań—the only such department and university organisational and educational unit of its kind in Poland (Mamzer 2020, 110). Since then, the methodology of archaeology and/or prehistory has become an important aspect of the archaeology curriculum at the Poznań centre (Minta-Tworzowska and Rączkowski 1996, 2007; Minta-Tworzowska 2001, 2002, 2017, 2021b, 2023; Minta-Tworzowska and Pawleta 2013).

The ideas, scientific problems and questions addressed within the department were continued and developed by J. Źak's colleagues and successors, both during

his lifetime and especially after his death. His students, and later generations of researchers, sought to answer the question explicitly posed by Henryk Mamzer (2020): why do we need the methodology and theory of archaeology? Specifically, what is ‘theory’ in archaeology, what is its relationship to the practice of the discipline, to the humanities and the intellectual world in general, and what role has it played in the development of Polish archaeology in recent decades?

Another important proponent of the PSM and influential archaeological theorist was Stanisław Tabaczyński (1930–2020) (Cyngot et al. 2020). He graduated from the university in Poznań, but worked throughout his academic career at the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnology of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw. He developed an original concept of the archaeological process, largely embedded in the Poznań School of Archaeology, and further blended with the Annales School and inspirations from the Italian academic archaeological milieu. He borrowed the concept of culture from Jerzy Kmita and debated with Jerzy Topolski on the concept of archaeological sources.

Tabaczyński’s views were eloquently expressed in a co-authored work with the Poznań philosopher Anna Pałubicka, herself a member of the Poznań School of Archaeology (Pałubicka and Tabaczyński 1986). In this publication, they presented an original perspective on the subject of archaeological research and its methodological foundations. In particular, they advocated issues of historical explanation, humanistic interpretation and functional-genetic explanation as indispensable elements of archaeological practice. Their approach to the issues of social development and cultural change involved an analysis of two conceptual frameworks: the systemic approach and the Marxist approach, and illustrated the criteria for interpretive validity within these frameworks.

Tabaczyński also developed an original concept of culture (1987). Among its key elements were the process of creating material remnants of the past, long-term processes, ethnogenetic processes and the polysemanisation of culture. The possibility of achieving the proposed research goals was to be ensured by a coherent methodology of archaeological research. This methodology was characterised by the integration of two intertwined research perspectives: historical and anthropological. This led to the development of a particular way of understanding archaeology as the anthropology of the prehistoric past, stretching between anthropology and history.

The works of Jerzy Topolski, a historian and co-founder of the Poznań Methodology School, also significantly influenced the concept of archaeological research in Poznań (Topolski 1983, 1984, 1996). His main interests concerned the nature and practice of studies of the past (Drozdowski et al. 1988; Pomorski 1988; Wrzosek 2013; Domańska 2016; Domańska and Topolska 2022). Inspired by new interpretations of historical materialism, he advocated the primacy and primordiality of ontology, defining the object of research, over the research itself. It means that the research objectives define the selection of epistemological and methodological solutions. Hence, historical materialism provided a theoretical model of the historical process, both as a means of selecting and categorizing facts and as a research agenda. Its essential premise was an ‘activist mode of the historical process’, which broke with the emphasis on deterministic factors external to man. In this view, the

historical process is made of humanistic components—intentional and conscious human actions. The dualistic nature of social reality, which consists of subjective human actions and their objective effects, prompted the adoption of ‘humanistic interpretation’ as a model to explain human actions. A further step aimed at strengthening our understanding of the research process involved the introduction of an ‘integral explanatory model’ that is a fusion of ‘humanistic interpretation’ and a deductive-nomological explanatory model. It made it possible not only to answer the question, ‘Why did X act in this way and not in that way?’, but also the question, ‘How did X get to know certain knowledge and norms’. This approach made it possible to draw attention to two important aspects: (i) the explanation of the motivation of people’s actions in the past (i.e., a definite departure from the concept of even history) and (ii) the modes of carrying out research by historians and archaeologists alike. As regards the latter, J. Topolski emphasised that the effect of research conducted by a historian depends not only on the knowledge of sources but also on ‘extra-source knowledge’, i.e. the non-verbalised, unconscious knowledge (e.g., the vision of the world and man, the understanding of science, etc.). To explain the phenomena of the past, it is required to have a coherent vision of the past (theoretical knowledge), and a comprehensive understanding of the complex nature of the research process. The so-called ‘conscious control’ requires the historian to be continuously aware on the becoming of the historical process and the role of the human being in this process. Hence, Topolski argued that one cannot talk about a single historical science (the same applies to archaeology) and that the criteria of their scientific character are not given but continuously changing.

The ideas pursued by J. Topolski have been well received by archaeologists attempting to move away from a positivist, cultural-historical practice of archaeology. Their impact can be identified in at least several research areas. From the beginning, critical reflection on the theoretical background of archaeological pursuits influenced the ways of researching the past (e.g., Źak 1974; Minta-Tworzowska 1994; Rączkowski 2002). These works showed how different modes of doing archaeology (posing questions, applying explanatory procedures, selecting modes of inference, etc.) were dependent on the theoretical assumptions advocated (consciously or not). The archaeologists were also inspired by Topolski’s approach to historical sources. This led to the development of the new concept of archaeological source (e.g., Minta-Tworzowska 1998b; also Marciniak 1996) as interpreted in the context of contemporaneity, defined and specified by the archaeologist (see also Pawleta, chapter “[Danuta Minta-Tworzowska and Her Role in Conceptualizing the Poznań School of Archaeology and Advancing the Methodology of Archaeology in Poland](#)”). The collaboration of J. Topolski and J. Źak significantly influenced a new approach to settlement pattern studies in the form hitherto conceptualized in Polish archaeology (Źak 1977, 1985). This new proposal was in line with the ‘activist conception of the historical process’ and unequivocally dissociated itself from the environmental determinism inspired by the anthropogeography of Friedrich Ratzl that has dominated archaeological practice to date (Rączkowski 2001). No less important was J. Źak’s and J. Topolski’s collaboration, which aimed at the development of a new type of synthesis of the past. Consequently, the theoretical assumptions

concerning the historical process shaped the character of the first, consciously theoretically designed, synthesis of the prehistory of the Polish lands (Żak 1975b).

Jerzy Topolski's original concepts, shaped at the time of the Poznań School of Methodology, were subject to change as a result of a deepening reflection on the research practice of historians, partly as a result of facing new views emerging in world history methodology (e.g., Georg Iggers, Hayden White). Without questioning the foundations of his thinking, J. Topolski introduced new themes. And this freshness of his thought constantly inspired archaeologists from the Poznań School of Archaeology to consciously take up new issues developed within the framework of new theoretical trends.

Another important contribution to the adoption of some elements of the Poznań School of Archaeology came from the philosophy of biology. In particular, it was inspired by the work of Krzysztof Łastowski, the Poznań biologist and philosopher, whose work focused on merging and comparing the theory of evolution with historical materialism. Łastowski is the author of a synthetic and naturalistic theory of evolution, and he was particularly concerned with its methodological aspects (Łastowski 1987). The work was inspired by the ideas of Leszek Nowak and his research environment. In particular, it was developed in the context of the idealizational theory of science.

4 The Research Traditions of the Poznań School of Archaeology

The archaeologists of the Poznań School of Archaeology follow two main methodological orientations: humanistic and naturalistic. Jan Żak's school greatly influenced his students, most notably Danuta Minta-Tworzowska (see Pawleta, chapter “[Danuta Minta-Tworzowska and Her Role in Conceptualizing the Poznań School of Archaeology and Advancing the Methodology of Archaeology in Poland](#)”), Andrzej Weber (1987, 1988), Włodzimierz Rączkowski (2002), Arkadiusz Marciniak (2005), as well as Anna Pałubicka (1990), and Andrzej P. Kowalski (1999). The most prominent representatives of the next generation are Adriana Ciesielska (2002), Rafal Zapłata (2005), Michał Pawleta (2016) and Lidia Żuk (2019). There are also several younger researchers. The intellectual paths of individual scholars are diverse, reflecting their search for paradigms and self-reflection on the role of theory in archaeology. The quest for interdisciplinarity has emerged as crucial, not only in theory but also in archaeological practice. This is manifested in an engagement with the methodology of the humanities, philosophy of science, methodology of history, cultural anthropology, inferential procedures and empirical foundations. The proponents of the Poznań School of Archaeology demonstrated in their work the indispensability of archaeological theory in every aspect of the research process. In the 1970s and 1980s, they attempted to apply theories directly derived from the PSM. However, from the 1990s onwards, after the fall of the Iron Curtain, they