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# The merits and challenges of an *Annales* approach to archaeology

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## Introduction

As our archaeological knowledge of the ancient world continues to expand, it has become clear to archaeologists and historians alike that novel interpretative approaches to this information need to be explored and developed. It is now possible, for example, to write regional histories and surveys of ancient European and Mediterranean economy and society in some periods largely on the basis of the archaeological record (Giardina 1986; Greene 1986; Millett 1990; Randsborg 1991). The present collection of essays asserts that Structural History, the creation of the *Annales* school of French historians, offers a useful approach to analyzing the human past as revealed by archaeology. As with most works that seek to introduce a new theoretical direction within a particular discipline, these essays suffer in places from being a little over-zealous in their attempt to subordinate specific archaeological knowledge within a structural framework. Nevertheless, there is much here to stimulate archaeologists and historians to rethink the ways in which they employ archaeology to construct and interpret the ancient world.

## The theoretical relevance of the *Annales* approach to archaeology

The origins of the *Annales* school of history may be traced to the late 19th c. when a new generation of French scholars, led by Vidal de la Blanche, Emile Durkheim, and Henri Barr challenged the prevalent German historiographical tradition emphasizing great men and environmental determinism as a central force in culture (Stoianovitch 1976). The interest of these three scholars in developing a more broad based understanding of human history and its relationship to the natural world is also to be understood within the context of the opening up of *la France profonde* as a result of the railroad, and of the establishment of an empire in Africa. Within the short span of 70 years, beginning in 1830, French administrators, capitalists, *colons*, and scholars were rapidly exposed to the remarkable cultural and environmental diversity of both their own country and the newly-acquired overseas territories. Neither the German nor existing French historiographical tradition, with its preference for political history, could adequately explain the often alien, diverse, and complex picture of past and present life that these discoveries wrought.<sup>1</sup>

The parallels between that pre-paradigmatic moment in the development of the *Annales* school and the present theoretical dilemma facing classical archaeology in particular are striking. Over the last two decades, archaeology has revealed aspects of classical antiquity unmentioned in the ancient sources and largely unaccountable for within the framework of the predominantly Germanic tradition of classical scholarship. Like their 19th-c. French predecessors, the contributors to this volume (with one exception) are attempting to respond to this wealth of new knowledge by offering a paradigm that rationalizes and orders it in new ways. Their preference for a model derived from history is not intended to privilege either historical archaeology (Snodgrass p.57) or models derived from history over those of other disciplines;

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1 E. Weber 1976 offers a particularly compelling account of the discovery of rural, undeveloped France by the official culture of Paris in the 19th c.