PART I: Introduction

Historical accounts can be pitched at different levels and these will generally change at different rates. ‘Deeper’ strata, such as the histories of sea routes or crop rotation, move more slowly than the ‘surface’ histories of governments and wars, and this means that different kinds of methodological questions are asked. A concern with how to establish causal sequences or whether totalities can be defined from a nexus of relations gives way to questions over what type of strata should be isolated for study, and the periodisation that should be adopted (AK 4, 10). While the focus in history was moving towards patterns on a large scale, specific histories dealing with strands of culture and knowledge (e.g., the history of ideas, of science, or of literature) appeared to move in the opposite direction towards a concern with rupture and discontinuity. The figures Foucault mentions in outlining this second tendency are among those whose work is most clearly a point of reference for the analyses that follow: Gaston Bachelard, Georges Canguilhem, Michel Serres and Martial Guéroult.

Of these, Bachelard arguably made the most influential contribution through his understanding of science as an open and episodic invention of new realities that are not drawn from empirical experience. Although Foucault does not mention them in the Introduction, Bachelard’s convictions that philosophy should learn lessons from the mathematical sciences, and that it should not impose on scientific thought a conceptual framework that science itself had left behind, were also both important for the notion of discourse and its analysis that Foucault introduces in this book, as was Bachelard’s writing on temporal atomism, or the arithmetisation of time (these themes are discussed in the section on Bachelard above). Canguilhem recognised that concepts have singular histories that do not usually conform to the pattern of gradual refinement, and focused attention on how the rules that determine the use of
concepts change. His attention to variations in the way concepts occur in different contexts, and on the fact that histories take on different formal or structural features according to the scale of the analysis, both have great significance for archaeology. The work of Serres is at least as significant for Foucault’s thought in this period. Here in the Introduction, Foucault mentions the idea of recurrent distributions and its importance for historical description, but he might also have mentioned Serres’ understanding of how the fact that mathematics had become its own epistemology had changed the practice of history and of philosophy, his appreciation that thinking is too rich and varied a practice to be defined by narrow rules or principles of any kind, his temporal pluralism, and finally (in this short and incomplete list) his appreciation that contingency and indeterminacy are not extrinsic to the emergence of rational systems. In relation to this last point, Serres’ interpretation (or assimilation) of ancient atomism is also important, not least for the conception of rules as regularities which will be essential to almost everything that Foucault has to say about discourse and the historical a priori. Martial Guèroult is a lesser known figure in the English speaking world, but his books on Descartes and Spinoza were influential for those who regarded philosophical thought as a systematic order, rather than the inspired creation of an individual mind. Foucault refers to Guèroult’s focus on internal coherences, compatibilities and connections, but he might also have noted his antipathy towards hermeneutic philosophy, which is shared by Foucault at several points in The Archaeology of Knowledge.

If one were to select some of the main points that can be drawn from each of the four figures the Foucault mentions here, the list would give a very good indication of what lies ahead: the constructive character of thinking no longer tied to sensible intuition; the complexity of the history of concepts as it spans different scales; temporal pluralism and the ordering of discourse by regularities; and the importance of attention to the systematic character of coherences and connections that work both within and across the forms of unity that are usually taken to populate discourse. The historical analyses to which Foucault refers aim to uncover not underlying principles and foundations but rather limits and transformations (AK 6, 12–13). Familiar questions give way to new ones concerning the specification of different forms of discontinuity and the criteria by which one is to isolate the unities that do feature (science, oeuvre, theory, concept, text). These are in fact questions to which Foucault’s analysis of archaeology intends at least to begin providing an answer.

As Foucault notes, it appears as though the history of thought, philosophy, knowledge and literature has been moving towards dis-
continuity just as ‘history itself’ has been moving in the other direction towards the study of greater continuities. But this is not so, he explains, since, ‘In fact, the same problems are being posed in either case, but they have provoked opposite effects on the surface’ (AK 6, 13). The two approaches intersect at the document. This, Foucault writes, is no longer treated as ‘the language of a voice since reduced to silence’ (AK 7, 14). That is to say, the aim of history is not to learn more about a subject whose expressions are everywhere and yet whose truth remains obscure. Instead of committing itself to the elucidation of man, history works with and on documents to explore the various patterns into which they spontaneously fall or can be fitted. Achieving this will mean splitting history from memory. What this means in a more concrete sense can be seen in Foucault’s example of the relation between the document and society: history, he writes, ‘is one way in which a society recognizes and develops a mass of documentation with which it is inextricably linked’ (AK 7, 14). Such an approach rules out treating society as a collective subject that can be the unifying ground of all the documents, while also ruling out society’s dependence on some other (presumably external) principle for its existence as a unity. Instead, it is in and through history that society coheres, even as a good deal of historical study appears to seek out discontinuity and division.

Again contrasting two apparently conflicting approaches to one another, Foucault observes that if history once aimed to transform ‘monuments’ into documents, giving voice to an otherwise silent expression rising from the past, now it does the reverse, turning documents into ‘monuments’. This has four consequences, which Foucault sets out over the next five pages, and which explain how the two apparently conflicting accounts of history outlined in the chapter so far are in fact just surface effects from the same process.

First, where history once forged causal links between empirical events, it now constitutes series, and series of series, adding layers to form tables. As Serres writes in the ‘Introduction’ to Hermes I, the line as a model is exchanged for the table, in which the route (or ensemble of routes) actually followed in the evolution of any mobile situation, including history, is picked out from what can be an entirely aleatory distribution (HI 13). This allows historical description to map greater complexity, but faced with more alternatives than ever before there is a need for a more subtle discrimination between different kinds of event, and between the forms of relation that exist between them. This in turn leads to a recognition that different kinds of event are linked over different scales. The appearance of long time-scales in historical studies can therefore be seen as following from the deliberate methodological
decision to develop series (AK 8–9, 15–16). Conversely, the history of
ideas, of thought, and of the sciences have seen the same change bring
about the opposite effect as longer series organised by, for example, the
teleology of reason are replaced by shorter series that are ‘irreducible to
a single law’ (AK 9, 16).

The second consequence is that discontinuity takes on a role of
central importance in contemporary history. It had always been the
task of the historian to take the raw material of discontinuity and work
it into a form of unity, demonstrating the relation between apparently
disparate events, discovering the common principle they share, or the
hidden narrative. Its role in contemporary historical analysis is quite
different. As Foucault writes, seeing discontinuity as a constituted con-
dition rather than an intrinsic quality of events in their raw state almost
obliges the historian to reflect on the way different levels of analysis are
distinguished from one another. But in addition to being produced by
historical discourse, and used by it as a methodological device, disconti-
uity is also studied in the variety of its forms. As such, it switches from
concept to object and back as history hones its descriptive tools not
on a fixed external reality but on a constructed experience. One might
object here that an account in which history is at once construction and
constructed is at risk of losing touch with ‘reality’ altogether and enter-
ing the realm of fiction, but the sense of history intended here comprises
the formation of the rules by which objects, concepts and methods are
‘there’ for us at all. As such, the ‘realist’ objection would always be
raised too late, having neglected the conditions for the experience on
which it is based. More troubling may be the concern that history itself
has taken over the structure that in modernity belonged to the figure
of man as an empirico-transcendental double, as both the object of
knowledge and the ground of that knowledge. If so, then archaeology
will have failed to break out of the closure Foucault described in The
Order of Things. Whether archaeology manages to avoid this difficulty
remains to be seen.

The move from a linear to a tabular model of history is reflected in
the replacement of what Foucault calls total history by general history.
Where the former finds the same kind of relation between events
repeated in different series, which therefore become linked analogi-
cally, general history determines the specificity of such series, with their
particular limits, divisions and forms of relation. It then considers what
relations may be found between such series, or elements within series,
and what effects follow from their displacement with respect to one
another or their superposition on one another; in other words, it con-
siders ‘what “tables” it is possible to draw up’ (AK 11, 18–19). Where
a total history occupies a unified space organised around a central principle of some kind, general history ramifies through ‘the space of a dispersion’ (AK 11, 19). The idea of dispersion features repeatedly in Foucault’s analysis, often with reference to time rather than space, and this is a first clue in the text itself as to how it is used. It appears that ‘dispersion’ does not designate a scattering of points or elements in either time or space, since this would assume a unified dimension, which would in turn imply the existence of a single principle, thereby returning the analysis of experience back to an analytic of finitude in the style of phenomenology. Instead, ‘dispersion’ designates a multiplicity of times or spaces that may or may not be compatible with one another, and which may be modified structurally through their contact with other times or spaces. The dispersion is therefore operative first of all at the level of rules, rather than things, events or elements. In addition to being irreducible to the unity of time characteristic of phenomenology, this also departs from a reading of dispersion in Kant’s Anthropology as the work of linear time (cf. pp. 36–7 above).

The final consequence of the new relation to the document is that a series of methodological questions have to be addressed, some of which are new and some of which are quite old. If bodies of documents are to be assembled, principles of choice have to be established, levels and methods of analysis defined, and various groups and sub-groups determined.

All these problems show that the methodological issues confronted by the new practice of historical analysis have not been taken over from the philosophy of history as traditionally understood. While the set of problems identified is not unique to archaeology, Foucault denies that they can all be grouped under the heading of structuralism. There may be several reasons for his reluctance to do this. First of all, structuralism as it was predominantly understood at the time had been drawn primarily from linguistics and ethnology, whereas archaeology is shaped by developments in mathematics and the sciences, as filtered through the works of Bachelard, Serres, Cavaillès, Canguilhem and others. Interestingly, Foucault also notes that many of problems addressed by the form of history he is describing were taken over from the discipline of economic history (one of the main areas analysed in The Order of Things), which suggests that the specific choices this involved and their impact on the practice of archaeology might themselves be an interesting topic of analysis. Second, linking archaeology to structuralism would encourage an easy assumption of methodological stability that Foucault discourages. One of the reasons why The Archaeology of Knowledge can be a challenging and sometimes frustrating book to
read is that archaeology has a certain openness and revisability built into it. Foucault’s closing remark in this section is that the opposition between structure and development has little or no relevance to the practice of history he is describing, and that historians have not been troubled by it for a long time. Although no explanation is offered, one suspects that the perception of a conflict between structure and development has troubled philosophers rather more than anyone else, and that this may say more about the conception of structure prevailing in philosophy than about the carelessness of practitioners in other fields. It was certainly not a concern for Cavaillès, for whom the structure of science was strictly identified with demonstration, and thereby with the movement unfolding through it. For him, ‘There is in reality no essential distinction between the hardened rings which seem to mark the terms and the movement that traverses them’ (OC 507). One can certainly say that the archaeological analysis of discourse requires a close alternation between construction and constructed, condition and conditioned, and therefore also between structure and development. Again, this draws attention back to the question of whether archaeology avoids the doubling of the transcendental and the empirical that Foucault identifies as constituting the impasse for knowledge in modernity, and it is a theme that will run through much of what follows.

Foucault observes that the ‘epistemological mutation’ of history is still underway (AK 12, 21). He attributes its inception to Marx, but goes on to reflect that history, and especially the history of thought, seems to have resisted the change. It is, he writes, as though our desire to see in history a means to the recovery of an origin has left us ‘afraid to conceive of the Other in the time of our own thought’ (AK 13, 21). This is a striking phrase. In spite of its Levinasian resonances, it is less an allusion to alterity in a directly ethical sense than a warning against treating time as a unity and, through memory, as the privileged form of interiority. The time of discourse is temporal dispersion, and to welcome the Other into the time of our own thought is therefore to expose ‘our own thought’ to an unpredictable becoming. This, it turns out, will prove to be the condition of thinking; that is, the critical and transformative practice Foucault elaborates as archaeological analysis (see AK III.4; below p. 108 and p. 157). Opposed to this, continuous history is ‘the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject’; it is the promise that anything that is lost will be restored, that any disruption, revolution or catastrophe is encompassed by the consciousness to which it is presented (or the spirit of which it is a passing manifestation) (AK 13–14, 22). To believe in such a promise is to defend the sovereignty the subject, and thus also to preserve the central
function of anthropology in the structure of knowledge in modernity. It leads, in Foucault’s view, to readings of Marx and Nietzsche that place them in the tradition of transcendental philosophy while misleadingly declaring a commitment to ‘the living openness of history’ (AK 14, 23). The litany of complaints that Foucault directs against this kind of interpretation makes it quite clear that history is a crucial staging post in the disappearance of man and the reconfiguration of knowledge at the end of modernity. Archaeology, he insists, does not do away with history, but only with a form of history that serves as ‘a place of rest, certainty, reconciliation, a place of tranquillized sleep’ (AK 16, 24). To some extent the analyses that follow codify the approach that Foucault had already put into practice in The History of Madness, The Birth of the Clinic, and The Order of Things, but he admits that they also include corrections and criticisms of his earlier work. Above all, The Archaeology of Knowledge is attempt to lay out an alternative form of history, one in which the functions previously accorded to transcendental philosophy are taken over by history, and in which a priori conditions are historical without being reducible to the empirical level. As I have noted already, it is a conception of history prefigured in works on the history and epistemology of the mathematical sciences by Bachelard, Cavaillès, Serres and others.