One of the most used and abused ideas in preservation projects is that of returning a building to its original state. But that’s easier said than done, for what is the origin of a building? Should we take the origin to be the moment when the architect finalized the plans, years before construction? Or the day the builder received the last payment? Maybe the day the owners moved in? Or the day, perhaps years later when a photographer was hired to document it? All of these questions presuppose that the origin of a building has to do with a date in the past. With this essay, Giorgio Agamben (b. 1942) suggests that pinning a date to a building does not get us any closer to understanding its origin. His emphasis on the word understanding is important, as with it he underscores the need to pause and reflect on what preservationists mean by original state. Agamben contributes to a line of thinking in preservation, reaching back to the 19th century, that holds what is original in a building to have less to do with its age—and the date when a stone was laid, if you will—and more to do with its physical condition and how it appears to us in the present. Viollet-Le-Duc had famously disassociated the building’s original state from its date of construction when he described it as “a condition of completeness which could never have existed at any given time.” By suggesting that chronology and historiography are not the most appropriate methods to understand the original state of buildings, Agamben invites the reader to consider different methods, especially philosophical methods, which are not typically employed in preservation practice. For Agamben, in order to restore or reconstruct a building’s original state one first has to fully understand that original state, to grasp something about the nature of its being. Agamben proposes ontology, the philosophical study of being, as the method best suited to the task—thus his call for a philosophical archeology, which we can extend here to a philosophical preservation. Agamben’s own understanding of ontology came from phenomenological philosophy. A graduate of the University of Rome, he was first exposed to Martin Heidegger’s hermeneutic ontology in the 1960s, participating in his seminars on Hegel and Heraclitus. He became a friend and collaborator with intellectual and artistic figures including the writers Elsa Morante and Italo Calvino and director Pier Paolo Pasolini. He directed the Italian edition of the works of Walter Benjamin, one of the major reference points of his thinking. Taking up Michel Foucault’s work on “biopolitics,” Agamben’s work, particularly his Homo Sacer series beginning in 1995, has come to focus on sovereign state power over individual citizens and the expanding “states of exception” in which governments suspend laws and citizens’ rights.

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