

A CRITIQUE OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL REASON

In *A Critique of Archaeological Reason*, Giorgio Buccellati presents a theory of excavation that aims at clarifying the nature of archaeology and its impact on contemporary thought. Integrating epistemological issues with methods of data collection and the role and impact of digital technology on archaeological work, the book explores digital data in order to comprehend its role in shaping meaning and understanding in archaeological excavation. The ability of archaeologists to record in the field, rather than offsite, has fundamentally changed the methods of observation, conceptualization, and interpretation of deposits. Focusing on the role of stratigraphy as the center of archaeological field work, Giorgio Buccellati examines the challenges of interpreting a 'broken tradition'; a civilization for which there are no living carriers today. He uses the site of Urkesh in Syria, where he has worked for decades, as a case study to demonstrate his theory.

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A Critique of Archaeological Reason

Structural, Digital and Philosophical Aspects
of the Excavated Record

GIORGIO BUCCELLATI



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*To Iko,
present at creation*

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Preface

The inquiry into the nature of archaeology and its theoretical presuppositions leads to unexpected results.

The question about its nature is a question about distinctiveness: What is unique about the discipline that sets it apart from others? The question about theoretical presuppositions relates to the conditions that make this distinctiveness possible: What is the frame of reference within which such uniqueness can best be understood?

Unexpected results are reached when one sees archaeological reason emerge as an independent dimension of human reason and become a mode of thought. As such, it affects the way in which we view reality, so that the theoretical presuppositions loom even larger and require a correspondingly fuller elaboration.

In articulating this line of thought, I have been following *two parallel paths*, which have conditioned over the years my own personal itinerary.

On the one hand, there was my long-standing confrontation with field-work and my ongoing reflection about it. It is the most concrete of situations, in which the urgency of practical matters and the scope of cultural results is often so daunting as to rob us of the mental space we need to reflect on theory. And yet reflect we must.

On the other hand, and intrinsic to this reflection, there was the urge for coherence, a coherence that draws on general systems of principles. This is the most abstract of reflections, but one that, in this case, was always deeply rooted in the materiality of its object. It was like trying to make sense of the effort to make sense: methodology at its best.

It was also an ongoing process. The act of excavation had its own rhythm: one could not stop and get off. Thus the theoretical reflection had to proceed apace. What ensued was an intense *cross-fertilization between practice and theory*. It often left to me reaching a standstill, but never, in

effect, an interruption. The abiding confidence in the value of the system, if coherently conceived, always carried the day.

This reinforced the conviction that abstraction, properly conceived, was on the side of concreteness. The underpinning lay in the concern for structure, described in and of itself, on the one hand, and tenaciously applied to the multiplicity of phenomena with which we were confronted, on the other. It was greatly reinforced by the ongoing concern to preserve the site through a committed conservation effort and to make the results accessible through an equally committed program of site presentation.

The concern for a theory of excavation was matched by a very early interest in the new conceptualization made possible by the growing availability of *the digital medium*. This, too, proposed a special blend of abstraction and concreteness. The firmness of an anchor could be found not in the apparent solidity of the digital technique (belied too frequently by the otherwise welcome cascading of upgrades), but in the cogency of the conceptual framework the medium was called to serve.

This confrontation, and my taking direct charge of the pertinent programming, provided the groundwork for a deepening insight into the very nature of digitality and its relation to the archaeological record, seen especially in its most creative moment, the unveiling of the stratigraphic nexus. The match was far greater than merely functional. What emerged was an unexpected secret kinship between the earth and the chip: archaeological reason could be considered intrinsically digital, and vice versa.

The concern for the structural cohesiveness of the whole is an integral part of a *linguistic research* aimed at seeing regularities as carriers of meaning. It extends to literature as well, where the analysis probes the most explicit measures of self-expression available for cultures that can no longer rely on living bearers. This elicited a higher level of awareness for the need to acknowledge the brokenness of a cultural tradition and for the equivalent need to devise adequate interpretive channels.

That is why there was more than a superficial link between linguistics and archaeology. Linguistics provided a model for defining a coherent grammatical approach and for showing how a structural understanding of a given whole goes beyond explaining the details of the component parts: it consistently helped me see, beneath the apparent fragmentation, an overarching unity as being itself a carrier of meaning.

The overall direction of these efforts was in many ways sustained by an underlying sensitivity for *the philosophical dimension*. In the first place, this provided the scaffolding for the theoretical archaeological construct I was developing: it sustained the belief that the search for a system was indeed

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not an end in itself, based on mere formalism, but was rather the spring that could release the self-display of unsuspected inner coherences within the complexity of the record.

It was a process of hermeneutics. And in this regard the notion of archaeological reason emerged as a special kind of human reason, one capable of throwing light on the broader issue of the hermeneutic framework, once we are forced to look beyond the availability of living carriers endowed with native competence. This seemed to open a door to a significant contribution that archaeology could make to philosophy.

* * *

Thus it is that different concerns intersect each other at the root level in the overall argument of this book – archaeological, digital and philosophical concerns, along with a sensitivity for the linguistic dimension. The corresponding conceptual realms require a special commitment in two directions.

First, archaeology, digitality, philosophy and linguistics are distant from each other in terms of the subject matter they address, and even more importantly in terms of their modality of study and sensitivity for the substance of the problems that emerge. Thus each requires a full immersion in a mode of thought that is highly distinctive and draws on compartmentalized methods and procedures.

Second, these fields are all profoundly relevant to each other with regard to the core issues I am taking up, in such a way that the interconnections affect the depth and substance of the central argument, not just the surface and the form of expression. Thus each depends on the other, and this interaction must be confronted in full if one wishes to arrive at a full understanding of the core issues that are being proposed.

I have striven for thoroughness in addressing both concerns, in ways that I would like to clarify.

There is in the book, I believe, a coherence that cuts across boundaries and gives unity to the whole. Keeping this coherence intact remained at all times at the center of my effort. I did not mean to write separate treatises on archaeology, digitality and philosophy, showing then a posteriori, and thus extrinsically, what links there may be among them. Rather, I meant to keep in focus the centrality of the goal that was at all times shared by the diverse approaches and sensitivities. The enrichment of diversity was palpable, as progress in one area was strengthened by an insight in another. It was the same sense of enrichment that the writing should be able to preserve and communicate.

This is another way to speak of interdisciplinarity. If it makes sense for an archaeologist to seriously entertain an in-depth reading of Kant; or for a philosopher to be exposed to details about emplacement and deposition; or for an IT specialist to reflect on how dirt archaeology speaks to the issue of digitality – if all of this is to make sense, it is because a confrontation that happens at the root level provokes infinitely more than one that hovers at the surface with easy generalizations.

For this reason I feel that the extensive treatments I give of diverse topics are not detours. They are necessary in constructing the larger and longer argument. I have sought to bring this out first of all in the logical development of the argument by stressing, in the body of the text, the interconnection of the different strands. There are anticipations and reprises, where the same topic is viewed from different points of view; there are transitions aiming to highlight the connections; and there is an abundance of internal cross-references, intended to assist the reader in keeping the larger picture in mind while going through the details.

There is also, however, a coherence within the single treatments of the individual themes. Parts I through III deal more specifically with archaeology, Part IV with the digital aspect and Part V with philosophy. Each can serve as a point of entry into the main argument. As such, each part can be read on its own merits, although the full implications can only be brought out by the way in which they cohere with the larger argument that is being developed.

For instance, the restrictive definition I give of archaeology, which is at the basis of the whole argument, is explained in archaeological terms in the first three parts – and I believe that it does rest convincingly on its own terms. But a full theoretical justification emerges only from a serious confrontation with the digital and philosophical considerations of Parts IV and V. Similarly, the elaboration, in Part V, of the relevance of structure in Kant should hopefully be of interest as it stands for a philosopher, but its full valence and broader significance for contemporary thought, as I see it, would only emerge in light of the description of archaeological reason, which in turn can only be argued on the basis of the details given in the first three parts.

* * *

The points I have raised indicate how the book is conceived: in the form of a long essay, with an emphasis on the unfolding of a central argument. The theoretical dimension is clearly in the foreground. It differs from current trends in archaeological theory in that it seeks to identify the intellectual presuppositions of that very theory, which I do not explicitly confront here as such. I provide only a minimum of

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exemplification in the course of the essay, and then in a very simplified manner, partly because of space constraints, but also in the belief that the flow of the argument may run smoothly enough to effectively present the case.

Another reason for the style adopted is that the book provides the theoretical foundations on all three levels (archaeological, digital and philosophical) for what is in effect the practical counterpart of this essay, namely the *Urkesk Website*. Thus, while the presentation given here is formulated in very abstract terms, there is a kind of mirror image that is concrete to the utmost.

What I have said about exemplification pertains also to documentation. In particular, bibliographical references are meant to open a window onto a quantity of materials that are quite vast and differentiated. The bibliography and the references given here must be considered only as indicative, illustrating a specific issue or pointing to a trend in the field. Full coverage of relevant works will be found in the separate dedicated website that accompanies this volume.

* * *

The gestation period of this work was long, extending over three decades and more, and as a result the persons and institutions involved in making it possible are beyond counting. Thus the pleasure of expressing my gratitude must be limited.

The staff of the Terqa and Urkesk excavations project, all of them, bore the brunt of the ongoing struggle to keep practice in synchrony with theory. Between enthusiasm and disbelief, the confrontation they offered me was, at all times, thought provoking in the most specific sense of the term: it provoked me to face discontinuities and incongruities, to manage the daily dirt in the ground while aiming for the ultimate purity of theory, to put in balance the expectation that there would eventually be an answer to all questions with the urgency of actually answering the immediate questions of the here and now.

In a most special way this affected the Terqa co-director and Urkesk director, my wife, Marilyn. Loyal to the grand design of the theory, and yet in need of more immediate results, she went flawlessly through the untold moments of transition, keeping full control of the enormous mass of data. In so doing, she gave the staff the needed reassurance that the effort was all and always worth it.

Away from the field, I had the converse experience. It derived from the need to explain to colleagues and students why details relating to field work

should matter in a theoretical discussion that broaches matters of philosophy and digitality. In this regard, I am especially grateful to colleagues, post-docs and advanced students who took a very active part in an engaging research project devoted to the Hermeneutics of Archaeology within the Philosophy Department at the Catholic University of Milan, Italy.

The anonymous readers provided very insightful comments on the core substance of the text, in all its various aspects, and I am most grateful to them for their critique, which has helped me greatly in the revision of the original manuscript. I am also grateful to Laerke Recht for her help with the final editing of the Index, and especially for her work on the bibliography and on the companion website. In addition, I benefited over these many years from the comments of a number of colleagues with whom I have shared the text in various stages of completion. For their detailed critique, I am especially grateful to Tamara Japaridze, Eric Kansa and David C. Schindler.

Because of the deep interconnection between the theoretical framework developed here and its verification through field work, I have depended deeply on the funding that made such field work possible: in a very concrete way, it was such funding that made this book possible. I leave for the *Urkish Website* a detailed acknowledgment of these indispensable sources of support, while here I will mention only those that have more specifically contributed to the theoretical dimension of the research: the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology at UCLA; the UCLA Transdisciplinary Seed Grant Forum within the Office of the Vice-Chancellor for Research; the Faculty Research Grant program of the UCLA Senate Committee on Research; the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Emeritus Fellowship Program; the Office of Research of the Catholic University of Milan; and IIMAS – The International Institute for Mesopotamian Area Studies. To all goes my heartfelt gratitude for a support that sustained the research momentum in more ways than just financial, important as this always was.

* * *

“Present at creation:” Iko and this book took their first steps together. This “creation” was not a single moment, but a long process, and throughout this period he was unfailingly present, with a presence defined by his loving identification with a project constant only in its drive to take shape. Thus it is that he became the closest and most faithful interlocutor, the one who most closely understood the deeper and most urgent goals of the enterprise. Dedicating the book to him crowns this unique collaboration at the same time that it gives voice to the depth of the bond of affection that unites us.