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Holtorf, Cornelius

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Abstract

The popular image of archaeology and what archaeologists do is based on various clichés which emphasise, among other things, adventurous fieldwork, the discovery of treasures and historical detective work. Although archaeologists may see themselves differently, their image in popular culture reveals a lot about how the subject is perceived and why it is so widely appreciated at present. I suggest that archaeologists ought to assess the potential social benefits of their popular image and address them explicitly in their work.

Key words: Archaeology, popular culture, public archaeology, underground, discovery, treasure, detective work.

Cornelius Holtorf, National Heritage Board, Box 5405, SE-114 84 Stockholm, Sweden.

cornelius.holtorf@raa.se

Doing Archaeology in Popular Culture

CORNELIUS HOLTORF

Archaeology is a particularly fascinating occupation of our age. People love to study it, read about it, watch it on TV, observe it in action and engage with its results. Resonances of archaeology can be found, for example, in films, literature, folklore, art, advertising, zoos, theme parks, and in the literature of psychoanalysis, criminology and philosophy, among other fields. There is much archaeological imagery all around us. It makes our present world a lot richer.

One of the underlying reasons for the popularity of archaeology is that archaeologists do not only dig in the ground but also in certain popular notions. In this paper, I shall demonstrate that the image of archaeology in popular culture is dominated, in particular, by references to three key themes.

1. Archaeology is about searching and finding treasure underground (or at any rate below the surface)

There are three main characteristics of the underground with resonances in a wide range of fields, including archaeology: (a) its invisibility from the surface, (b) the hidden treasures it contains, and (c) the risks involved in getting at these treasures. These characteristics are, for example, apparent in folk tales about treasures that are suspected to lie in ancient barrows, where attempts to retrieve these possessions are usually prevented by some kind of deadly creature or mechanism. A fine literary example is James Rollins' novel *Excavation* (2000) which describes the discoveries and ordeals of a group of archaeology students in the Peruvian jungle. The text on the back cover reads like this:

“The South American jungle guards many secrets and a remarkable site nestled between two towering Andean peaks, hidden from human eyes for thousands of years. Dig deeper through layers of rock and mystery, through centuries of dark, forgotten legend. Into ancient catacombs where ingenious traps have been laid to ensnare the careless and unsuspecting; where earth-shattering discoveries—and wealth beyond imagining—could be the reward for those with the courage to face the terrible unknown. Something is waiting here where the perilous journey ends, in the cold, shrouded heart of a breathtaking necropolis; something created by Man, yet not humanly possible. Something wondrous. Something terrifying.”

All the elements of the underground theme are here: a hidden site which can be reached by digging deeper, promising earth-shattering discoveries and wealth beyond imagining, but fraught with danger and terror. This may be an extreme example, but in principle every archaeologist is braving the various troubles of archaeological fieldwork and the risks of archaeological interpretation in order to find and uncover what is precious to us as part of our history, identity and world view (see also Fig. 1). Treasures, indeed!

As a matter of fact, the idea of gaining valuable insights by revealing what is below the surface has long transcended its literal, archaeological meaning and indeed become the dominant metaphor for truth-seeking in many fields. A good example is psychoanalysis, which Sigmund Freud described as “the archaeology of the human soul”. He stated once about the practice of psychoanalysis (Freud 1964: 259):

“[The analytic work] resembles to a great extent an archaeologist’s excavation of some dwelling-place that has been destroyed and buried or of some ancient edifice. The two processes are in fact identical, except that the analyst works under better conditions and has more material at his command to assist him, since what he is dealing with is not something destroyed but something that is still alive.”

2. Archaeological fieldwork involves making discoveries in tough conditions and in exotic locations

Entering the underground can be an adventurous and sometimes dangerous



Fig. 1. Lost Treasure Golf with Professor Hacker leading an expedition to search for ancient gold and diamonds. Seen in Branson, Missouri. Photograph © by Marcia-Anne Dobres 2001, reproduced by permission. See also <http://www.losttreasuregolf.com/>.

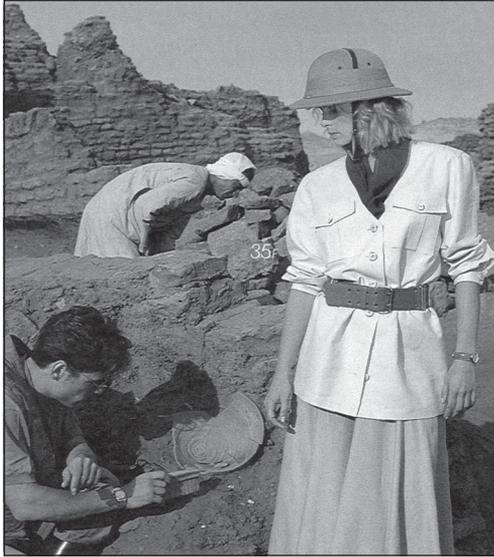


Fig. 2. Archaeological fashion, “colonial style”. From the German women’s magazine Verena, 5/1990:65. Photograph © by Wilfried Beege, reproduced by permission.

enterprise, but it is potentially very lucrative. To some extent, the idea of archaeological fieldwork is derived from this image: it is an exciting and occasionally risky adventure, at the end of which the archaeologist seeks to be rewarded by discovery.

Even among archaeologists themselves, those who do not do fieldwork are often mocked as “armchair archaeologists”. It is therefore hardly surprising that

practical fieldwork is widely considered to be of central importance for the training of students. As Stephanie Moser put it in her study of Australian prehistoric archaeology, “it was in the field that students learnt how to ‘do archaeology’ and thus become ‘real’ archaeologists” (1995: 185). Going into the field is the principal initiation rite for an apprentice archaeologist. Yet this traditional emphasis on fieldwork is only partly to do with learning to master the practical skills of archaeology. In the field, students also learn the many unspoken rules, values and gender roles of the disciplinary culture of archaeology (Moser 1995). Moreover, enduring the ordeals of fieldwork tests the students’ commitment and, in turn, earns them rank and status. Stories about the hardship of fieldwork and anecdotes derived from the shared experience of being in the field with other students or colleagues are a popular subject of conversation among archaeologists. As collective memories, they can forge a strong sense of social and professional identity.

It is particularly fitting that the popular image of the archaeologist should also emphasise fieldwork so much. The archaeologist is often portrayed as “the cowboy of science”, living a life of romance and risky adventures in exotic places (see also Fig. 2). The Indiana Jones movies have been especially influential here, but the cliché, as such, is far older. Already in 1949, Alfred Kidder observed that

“in popular belief, and unfortunately to some extent in fact, there are two sorts of archaeologists, the hairy-chested and the hairy-chinned. [The hairy-chested variety appears] as a strong-jawed young man in a tropical helmet, pistol on hip, hacking his way through the jungle in search of lost cities and buried treasure. His boots, always highly polished, reach to his knees, presumably for protection against black mambas and other sorts of deadly serpents. The only concession he makes to the difficulties and dangers of his calling is to have his shirt enough unbuttoned to reveal the manliness of his bosom.”

The archaeologist is depicted here as a passionate and totally devoted adventurer and explorer who conquers ancient sites and artefacts, thereby pushing forward the frontiers of our knowledge about the past. The associated narratives resemble those of the stereotypical hero who embarks on a quest to which he is fully devoted, is tested in the field, makes a spectacular discovery and finally emerges as the virtuous man (or, exceptionally, woman) when the quest is fulfilled. This is seen nowhere more clearly than in descriptions of the life and career of Heinrich Schliemann, who was, and is, a popular hero (Zintzen 1998).

3. Like a detective, the archaeologist tries to piece together what happened in the past

Returning to Alfred Kidder, we read that

“The hairy-chinned archaeologist [...] is old. He is benevolently absent-minded. His only weapon is a magnifying glass, with which he scrutinizes inscriptions in forgotten languages. Usually his triumphant decipherment coincides, in the last chapter, with the daughter’s rescue from savages by the handsome young assistant.”

The hairy-chinned archaeologist is the scholar and detective. Like the detective, the archaeologist solves mysteries and is often portrayed as creating light where there was darkness, by finding clues and revealing truths (Holtorf 2003 and forthcoming (b)). Even Agatha Christie’s Hercule Poirot is inspired by archaeological methodology. At the end of his adventures in Mesopotamia, the archaeologist Dr Leidner, after being found out as the murderer himself, commends the famous detective with the words: “You would have made a good archaeologist, M. Poirot. You have the gift of re-creating the past” (Christie 1994 [1936]: 215).

According to Massimo Pallotino (1968: 12), it is the process of searching for, and interpreting, clues that makes archaeology “so exciting to the general public, who derive such enjoyment from reading detective stories or following the twists and turns of court cases” (see also Fig. 3). A case in point was the very widely reported discovery of the Ice Man in the Italian Alps more than a decade ago. It was initially investigated by forensic scientists, but the archaeologists too were much concerned with documenting and retrieving even the smallest piece of evidence on the site in order to reconstruct what had happened there. Konrad Spindler’s book (1994), telling the story of the Ice Man’s discovery and the initial results of the ensuing archaeological research, was so popular that for several years it was even available in airport bookstores. Even today, the Ice Man regains his popularity in the media every time a new clue has been found and analysed, contributing to complete the picture of who this man was, how he lived and how he died.

The significance of doing archaeology

In the light of these three prominent themes of archaeology, it should not surprise anybody that for many the process of doing archaeology is more exciting and important than its actual results. The subject of archaeology brings three themes together, each of which is powerful and popular even by itself. The underground, adventurous fieldwork, and criminology become manifest in the actions, tools and skills of the archaeologist. Ironically, it is this very physical and material dimension



Fig. 3. Hairy-chinned Playmobil explorer searching for clues in order to illuminate ancient civilizations in the jungle. Image by courtesy of Playmobil, a registered trademark of geobra Brandstätter GmbH & Co. KG, reproduced by permission. The company also holds all rights to the displayed toy figures.

of archaeology that seems to have been overlooked at times by the archaeologists themselves.

Archaeologists tend to see themselves mostly as (pre-)historians who are concerned with cognitive insights into the past or as caretakers and managers of existing collections or sites. What matters first and foremost to them is *what* a site looks like today and *what* it can tell us about the past – and generally not *how* it has been investigated and *how* its significance came into being, as it were. In other words, professional archaeologists tend to assume that *what* archaeology leaves us with is more important than *how* it is done. With this view, we might wake up one day and find that we have all the knowledge about the past and all the heritage sites we need, and consequently put an end to archaeology.

On the contrary, *I wish to suggest that archaeology is culturally significant mainly because the process of doing it is significant in itself.* As Gavin Lucas put it (1997: 9), ever to complete meaningful, archaeological processes such as searching, digging, collecting and preserving, would frustrate the very desires which lie behind them. It is not a question of needs being eventually fulfilled but of deeply felt desires being sustained. The search for the past is the search for ourselves (Holtorf, forthcoming (b)). As a consequence, we have never revealed enough about the past, a collection of antiquities is never complete, there are never sufficient numbers of sites preserved. The archaeological process must therefore go on continuously –

we have to be “at it” all the time. The action must never come to a halt.

This may be one reason why the British TV documentary series *Time Team*, which has recently broadcast its tenth annual series, has been extremely successful for so long. Its normal format is a one-hour programme documenting a three-day, archaeological excavation at a chosen site. The highlights of each programme are the moments when the presenter Tony Robinson gets called over to look at a newly discovered, material clue and the subsequent discussion, which is often followed up by expert analysis, about its significance in relation to what happened at the site in the past. The latest *Time Team* book (Robinson and Aston 2002) takes a similar approach. An associated press release proclaimed that “archaeology has never been so much fun. This book will inspire everyone to get out into their back gardens and start digging.”

Conclusions

Understandably, archaeologists have often judged their popular image by what it fails to do. How Indiana Jones spends his day is certainly not a fair representation of actual archaeological practice (for example, he doesn't have coffee breaks). I would like to suggest, however, that it is of little use to complain that people who are not professional archaeologists themselves may have an in some respects badly informed view of professional archaeology and what it has achieved. Instead, these views are significant in themselves and ultimately an important part of the current fascination and popularity of archaeology as a whole (Holtorf, forthcoming (a)).

Ever since the emergence of modern archaeology during the 19th century, the popular fascination with the process of doing archaeology has remained virtually the same (Zintzen 1998). What is required is an attempt to understand both the cultural context from which this fascination emerges and the (maybe changing?) cultural needs to which it responds. In other words, professional archaeologists should appreciate these alternative understandings for what they are rather than for what they are not.

Let us look, then, at what the cliché of archaeology in popular culture *does* achieve. By emphasising the process of doing archaeology, it expresses a fascination with methodical human inquiry and idealises persistence in adverse circumstances, eventually being rewarded by valuable treasure or new insights. It also gives people the satisfaction of imagining a different life, which is full of adventure and purposeful missions, such as those involved in solving a “mystery” or preventing a “treasure” from falling into the wrong hands. These are no small achievements.

Arguably, a society benefits from individuals who can occasionally fulfil some of their dreams or gain satisfaction from (seemingly) being able to contribute to important missions. It makes for happier people and better stories that they can tell, both themselves and others.

A society also benefits from people with inquiring minds, and maybe much more so than from receptive students who are ready to learn factual knowledge. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1729-1781), one of the foremost thinkers of the Enlightenment, argued this very point in 1777 (cited from <http://www.projekt.gutenberg.de/lessing/essays/wahrheit.htm>):

“Nicht die Wahrheit, in deren Besitz irgendein Mensch ist oder zu sein vermeinet, sondern die aufrichtige Mühe, die er angewandt hat, hinter die Wahrheit zu kommen, macht den Wert des Menschen. Denn nicht durch den Besitz, sondern durch die Nachforschung der Wahrheit erweitern sich seine Kräfte, worin allein seine immer wachsende Vollkommenheit besteht.”

In other words, more valuable than possessing truths is searching for truths by methodical inquiry. Taking this seriously means encouraging any such inquiries, and not just those that, at any given time, happen to resemble certain professional approaches.

Professional archaeology can make very significant contributions to achieving such aims. It is not for nothing that Indiana Jones too is “in real life” a professional archaeologist who is employed by an American university! What professional archaeology has got to offer is as good or superior to what archaeologists on TV, in movies or in fictional novels can provide. This is not because they necessarily always get the facts right. It is because professional archaeology can let people become involved in the real thing rather than watch a film or read a book.

There are already many good examples of how amateurs can get involved in archaeological practice. Professional archaeologists have the expertise to guide people’s involvement in directions that may be best for both parties. They can suggest particular sites that deserve or need attention and recommend specific actions; they can support research by pointing to interesting literature or comparable efforts elsewhere; they can get like-minded people in touch with each other; they can mediate between archaeological projects that need help and people interested in becoming volunteers. Most importantly, they can make people aware of politically or ethically highly disputed notions that are occasionally connected with archaeology. Over the past few years, archaeologists have become very aware not only of the looming dangers of mainstream nationalism, but also of the political claims made by minorities and indigenous populations. There are also risks of archaeology becoming (or remaining?) reliant on colonial or neo-colonial, exploitative relations with non-western communities or on patriarchal social structures in the western world itself (cf. Figs. 1-3). By becoming more involved in, and ultimately a significant part of popular culture, archaeologists can make sure that all these issues are kept on the agenda and can inform everybody’s judgment about what is and is not considered politically or ethically acceptable when doing archaeology.

Yes, a lot of that already happens in “public archaeology” projects, because it helps archaeologists to achieve aims to which they usually give greater significance, such as advancing scientific research, educating people about academic knowledge, preserving sites and increasing public support. In the light of what I have argued, this hierarchy of aims and means may need to be reconsidered (see also Holtorf, forthcoming (a)). What I suggest is that we should adopt as our most important aim what makes our field so exciting and so valuable, both in popular culture and in reality: the possibility for people to live out some of their dreams and to develop inquiring minds by being archaeologists themselves, if only for a day. To me, the benefits gained from that are what really matters about doing archaeology.

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