

Presentation and Interpretation of Archaeological Sites: The Case of Tell Mozan, Ancient Urkesh

Giorgio Buccellati

Abstract: *Management of archaeological sites should not be viewed as an additional layer that is imposed from without but as something that issues from the intrinsic value of the monument. From this perspective, the best management practice is one that reflects the strategy that has brought the site back to light in the first place. As part of management, the excavator ought to communicate the motivation behind the recovery, because that is the same motivation that governs any effort at conserving and presenting. Only then can the excavator legitimately leave the site and turn it over to others for protracted management. The thrust of this article is that the archaeologist-excavator must work with a view toward final presentation from the very beginning of the excavation process. Such an effort will remain inscribed in the monument in ways that could never be proposed again later and will make a broader fruition of the monument flow seamlessly from its intrinsic value as progressively perceived through the excavation. This conviction is developed not out of theory but rather out of the practice of archaeological work at a particular site, which is at the basis of the conclusions proposed here. It may be said that if ancient Urkesh lay buried under what came to be known as Tell Mozan, we as excavators are the ones who have once again turned Mozan into Urkesh. This paper seeks to describe how we have gone about this task.*

Archaeological “Localization”

Let me propose a metaphor, taking my cue from a neologism. The term “localization” has come to be used regularly in information technology and related domains to refer to what we might normally call “translation.” There is a whole industry built around this concept: it addresses the particular need to make commercial websites accessible not only and not so

much in different languages, but in different cultures. How to advertise bathing suits to Eskimos might be a *reductio ad absurdum* of this process. The point is that to sell a product one has to make it “locally” relevant; one has to translate not just words but a whole mind-set and the material embodiments by which it is represented. You might say that localization is the commercial side of semiotics.

So it should be, I would argue, with the presentation and interpretation of archaeological sites. We seek to convey understanding. In a commercial venture, understanding is seen primarily as appeal: it is not so much that a firm wants customers to understand the inner workings of its product; it only wants them to understand what can appeal to them so that a potential customer becomes an actual one. In a cavalier, and ultimately patronizing, approach to the presentation of an archaeological site we may fall prey to the same syndrome: whatever the *vulgus* can accept, that’s what we’ll provide them. But this attitude, and any shade thereof, must be avoided—for three good reasons.

First, there is an intrinsic value to presentation and interpretation—to archaeological “localization,” if you will. Culture is a continuum, and there should be no hopeless rift between the technical aspects of archaeology and the interests of the layperson. Gradual transitions in the kind and amount of detail, yes. But a sharp break—no. When presenting and interpreting, the archaeologist must be like an orchestra conductor: few if any people in the audience may be able to read the score, but the music performed *is* the score, not a watered-down semblance of it. It is such a profound respect for the continuity of culture that will save us from any form of paternalism, whether *vis-à-vis* stakeholders or tourists. And note that just as a conductor is first and foremost a musician, so

must archaeological “localization” remain in the hands of the archaeologists. It should not become a job that we gladly relinquish to outsiders, leaving it for them to decide what the rhythm should be or where the crescendos should go.

Second, presentation and interpretation are an extension of our teaching mission. We must be able to gauge the common ground between our technical knowledge and the degree of readiness in our audience. We must be in touch with the concerns of our audience, and address them—not in order to sycophantically modify our data for the sake of pleasing but rather in order to present what we perceive as real values in such a way that they can be truly appropriated. The other side of paternalism is a “take it or leave it” attitude: this is what we offer, too bad if you don’t like it. Instead, we must identify with legitimate interests, stir them, and provide answers.

Third, presentation and interpretation should enrich our own archaeological horizon. We must become better archaeologists precisely through the effort of explaining. After all, the whole of scholarship is a form of translation. As archaeologists, we translate a mound of dirt into a pile of paper or its digital counterpart. And this process develops in a capillary sort of way from the most synthetic to the most analytic. But the data so understood and so presented remain always a single whole: answering the broadest question has implications for the most remote detail. This is also why we archaeologists must be the presenters. Trained, there is no doubt, by the skills that show us how to help the audience appropriate the intended target, but also trained to bear in mind the nature and value of this same target.

In this light, “popularization” is not a secondary endeavor with which the archaeologist cannot be bothered. It is rather an intrinsic aspect of our task. In the few remarks that follow I deal with a few instances that may help to show how this can happen in a concrete situation, using as a test case our own work at Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, in northeastern Syria. In so doing, I plan to address the concerns of the overall theme in this session of WAC from a perspective that is only seemingly tangential. It goes to the core of the problem, I submit, if we view management (at least as far as it pertains to an archaeological site) not as an additional layer that is imposed from without but as something that issues from the intrinsic value of the monument. From this perspective, the best management practice is one that reflects the strategy that has brought the site back to light in the first place. The excavator ought to communicate the motivation behind the recovery, because that is the same motivation that governs any effort at conserving and presenting. Thus the

thrust of my argument is that the archaeologist-excavator must work with a view toward final conservation and presentation from the very beginning of the excavation process. Such an effort will remain inscribed in the monument in ways that could never be proposed later and will make a broader fruition of the monument flow seamlessly from its intrinsic value as progressively perceived through the excavation. For better or for worse, that has been my concern at the site about which I am speaking here. It may be said that if ancient Urkesh lay buried under what came to be known as Tell Mozan, we as excavators are the ones who have once again turned Mozan into Urkesh. Here, then, I seek to describe how we have gone about this task.

What Popularization Can Do for Scholarship

In our effort at protecting the mud-brick walls of a royal palace that is undergoing long-term excavation, we have aimed at combining conservation with reconstruction (see my article in Part III of this volume). This makes the ruins much more understandable to even the occasional visitor, particularly with the addition of color schemes and signs that explain the function of the various rooms through which one can in fact walk with a newly acquired sense of appreciation for such things as circulation patterns or size of rooms, which remain abstract when just laid out on paper. But unexpected results quickly become apparent for the archaeologists as well. No matter how well trained one is to read floor plans and sections, the danger is always present to perceive them as they are on our reading medium (whether paper or the computer screen), that is, as planes rather than as indices to volumes. The effort at “reconstructing” our walls by means of metal and canvas coverings could not be justified only in the function of correcting this misperception. But, having embarked on a reconstruction program that aims at presenting the architecture to the public in an understandable way, there is the unquestionable benefit that the archaeologist, too, can perceptually relate to volumes rather than just planes. Here is a very telling example of the continuum about which I was speaking earlier: the effort of visualizing serves the same function that biofeedback does, because the volumes one reconstructs for public presentation elicit a new understanding of the very premises on which the reconstruction is based in the first place.

It also quickly emerges that only the team of archaeologist and conservator could accomplish this. One cannot subcontract the task to outsiders, because the questions that arise

in the process require a full understanding of the stratigraphic premises on the one hand (archaeology) and of the limits of intervention on the other (conservation). An apt parallel can be found in the textual sphere. A “good” translation is not the “translation of a translation,” that is, the reworking of a “literal” translation. Rather, a “good” translation is one that transfers the syntactical, semantic, and semiotic valence of the original text—hence one that requires an even greater understanding of the source language than is needed for a “literal” translation, that is, a rendering of mere morphological and lexical features. Thus in the case of our palace, every detail of the reconstruction is assessed both in terms of its stratigraphic and functional relevance as understood by the archaeologist and in terms of its susceptibility to preservation.

Virtual reality reconstructions are another good example of how important it is that archaeologists be directly involved in the technology. No such project can be handed to an outsider the way we give a manuscript to the printer. We do not want to just present an aesthetically attractive rendering to the public. Rather, the presentation ought to serve as a vehicle for an in-depth consideration of spatial relationships that may not be immediately apparent, even after the walls are restored to their original dimensions. A three-dimensional model elicits questions from the archaeologist that have an important heuristic function, in that it directs attention to aspects of connectivity that one might not otherwise suspect.

Ultimately, a thorough effort at presentation and interpretation becomes involved in matters of semiotics that can also be surprising. Signs were dynamic and easily perceived by the culture from which the monuments arose. Palace and temple were endowed with a richness of meaning that is only dimly hinted at in the meager remnants we bring back to light. The very words *palace* and *temple* may in fact be more evocative than the ruin. But we must assume that the ancients would instinctively have had a full semiotic perception—that is, an awareness of the valence a monument can have as a sign. Perhaps no amount of reconstruction and explanation can ever again elicit such a perception, but a committed effort to a reconstruction and explanation so directed can endow the ruin with a resonance it lacks when we, the archaeologists, stop after we have laid bare the skeleton. The effort to communicate the value of ancient signs to the public forces scholars to think more deeply about just what such value was. In this respect, presentation and interpretation, resting on stratigraphic understanding and conservation skills, serve as the conduit for a proper humanistic approach to archaeology. The overriding concern of such an approach to the past lies in the

appropriation of past experience, an appropriation not based on fantasy but rather on a controlled reflection about what the ancient experience in fact was. We may say that the archaeologists’ first task is to establish, with the tools and the sensitivity of a social scientist, the patterns that are recognizable in the physical record. At which point, they continue with the tools and the sensitivity of the humanist to reach beneath the simple clustering of patterns and to inquire after the meaning that gave them origin in the first place.

What Popularization Can Do for Conservation

More specifically, we may now consider the effect on conservation of popularization taken in the sense of proper presentation and interpretation. An effort to promote understanding of a site is a two-way street. On the one hand, a site that is well understood encourages people to preserve it. On the other hand, eliciting meaning for others, even the occasional others, raises the archaeologist’s awareness for meaning *tout court*.

As for the first point, pride in one’s heritage is the best guarantee against looting, or even casual damage. But such pride can only derive from an understanding of the intrinsic value of a site. Archaeological ruins are not always immediately evocative of grandeur, hence education is as critical a component as conservation and reconstruction. The second point is the reverse. As scholars, we are not engaged in empty advertising. We don’t make up meaning; we find it. And any effort to convey it to others—from peasants to politicians—helps us to see it in a different light. Culture is a continuum not only because it can be explained, but because the explanation rebounds on the explainer.

At Mozan, we have pursued these goals in a common-sense sort of way, that is, not so much out of a predetermined program that we had set out to implement but rather responding to needs as they were perceived little by little. This is not to say that we stumbled into action casually and haphazardly. There was from the beginning a strong commitment to the basic principles that I have been outlining, and what developed slowly were only the specific forms that our concrete implementation of these principles took over time.

For instance, we found that the best way to integrate the “stakeholders” (we did not then have a name for them), and at the same time the best way to avoid any form of paternalism (or neocolonialism, if you wish), was to develop our own sense of commitment to values. In this manner, the effect of our actions was to co-opt and be co-opted at the same time. To co-opt—because we assume that the values we believe in

have an independent pull on the “others.” And to be co-opted—because we are eager to appropriate the values they in turn believe in. It is then clear that we want to share something that we consider valuable in its own terms. In this way we have communicated the need to conserve the nonspectacular as well as the spectacular—and this is no small feat in archaeology. We have nurtured an atmosphere of great care for the maintenance of the past by showing how even small details are essential to understand the larger picture. As a result, there is a sense of pride not just in the fruition of the finished product as presented but also in its maintenance. And conversely, the stakeholders nurtured in us an appreciation for responses that we did not expect—poetic addresses, for instance, on the part of what turned out to be innumerable poets among our neighbors, or drawings, or even musical compositions inspired by “our” shared archaeological site that looms so large on all our various horizons.

Importantly, along these lines, our early start on conservation showed how we are professionally involved in conservation. Walls were preserved when first exposed, not after they were known to be the walls of a palace. This communicated our commitment to the exposed relic as such, regardless of its potential public relations value. It communicated, in other words, a degree of professional integrity and coherence that was not lost on the audience (again, our “stakeholders”). In return, we were strengthened in our resolve, because their embracing our effort underscored for us the intrinsic worth of the effort, almost as much as receiving an additional grant!

The presentation we provide as a finished product (reconstructed walls, posters, handouts, even an audiotape that accompanies a visitor when we are not present at the site) is the major avenue for our message. But another very important channel of communication has been the talks we give in more or less formal settings. We begin with our own workmen, who number up to two hundred in some seasons: we give general overviews with slides and now computers, but we also give, to the crews of the individual excavation units, periodic assessments of the goals, the progress, the strategy. We provide them with handouts that spell out dates and names. Our workmen and other local collaborators, who are all from neighboring villages and towns, come back with their families and friends and begin to explain not just about walls and buildings but about events and history. We also give more formal presentations in the local towns, whether in cultural centers or schools, and of course receive groups and individuals who come for an occasional visit. The newly found understanding of their own territorial past is a source of great

energy, and it obviously provides a firm lever on which rests the long-term protection of the site.

Some episodes attest to the far-reaching benefits of this approach. Our site was used as a burial ground for neighboring villages. That this can no longer be the case was accepted with good grace, but beyond that we have also started working on the removal of existing burials, with the full cooperation of the families. In the case of the village of Mozan itself, we established a common cemetery where the human remains that we have studied are reburied along with the bodies of newly deceased members of the village. Also, in the lower portion of the tell, which corresponds to the ancient outer city (for a total of almost 150 hectares), there are fields that are owned by local farmers who cultivate them on a regular basis. A change from wheat to cotton culture has stimulated the construction of industrial-type wells. When one is planned, the owner waits for the expedition to return, at which time we do a sounding and submit a recommendation to the Directorate General of Antiquities and Museums as to whether a permit may or may not be granted. And even when our recommendation is negative, it is accepted without grudge. Finally, the urban growth of neighboring towns has been chartered by the various local governments in ways that respond to the requirements of archaeology as we have been presenting them. The positive result is that the ensuing regulatory plans take into full account the landscape in which the site is located and seek to protect it by steering the development away from it.

Conclusion: “Localization” as Semiotics

As in the case of conservation, presentation and broad interpretation for the public, or archaeological “localization,” must not be viewed as an outside intervention that takes place apart from, independently of, and long after the archaeological work proper. “Localization” must be inserted in the archaeological work itself, avoiding the tendency to see it as something which is both *a posteriori* and *ab exteriori*. The main reason, I have argued, is that archaeology as such benefits from the effort, that is, that we learn about our side of archaeology by seeking to present it and explain it to the local and the wider public. Unquestionably, better archaeology results from proper localization.

In our experience, this means that pertinent concerns must be inscribed in the excavation process itself and not left for a distant, later, and extrinsic intervention. It is, to some extent, a matter of sensitivity more than of procedures or

staffing. In a broad sense, this touches on the question of meaning. For the archaeologist, meaning can easily be reduced to technical control, more or less defined by metrical data, and reinforced by statistical correlations among seemingly infinite masses of data. And it is indeed important that we master this aspect of our trade. For in the absence of full control, there can only be fantasy. But it is important that we seek the meaning beyond, or rather behind, the patterns, that is, the meaning that ultimately gave rise to the

patterns when the “data” were embedded in the stream of life. It is in this sense that I have referred to localization as “semiotics.” Properly, we seek to identify the value that signs had for the ancients. But an invaluable support to this effort is the parallel endeavor to identify the value that the same signs ought to have for our contemporaries. In this way, we all—archaeologists working at the site, modern inhabitants of the area, and outside visitors—become stakeholders of our common past.

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Of the Past, for the Future: Integrating Archaeology and Conservation



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*Edited by Neville Agnew and
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