An Archaeologist on Mars

GIORGIO BUCCELLATI

Cotsen Institute of Archaeology
University of California at Los Angeles

> Go up any of the ancient tells and walk about,
> see the skulls of people from ages ago and from yesteryear:
> can you tell the difference?[1]

Archaeology has been with us, it seems reasonable to imagine, ever since humans left traces for other humans to find. This bond across centuries is rooted in the awareness of what a human trace is: culture as evidenced by material remains. The instant recognition of a common past, which the text from ancient Mesopotamia cited above evokes in us, does not need scholarly support. But sorting out the differences does, and this is where archaeology as a discipline begins.

This is also where reflection about archaeology begins—the philosophy, if you will, of archaeology. It is one of William G. Dever's many merits to have contributed to this issue in a programmatic way, particularly in his recent volume *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (2001), in which he takes up a wide range of issues dealing with the epistemological underpinnings of the discipline. He especially confronts the implicit assumptions that condition, more or less unwittingly, the mapping of archaeology onto history, with regard to ancient Israel. As a tribute to his efforts, I would like to pursue here a similar line of reasoning, taking up a single, core issue and drawing some conclusions that directly pertain to Dever's central argument.

Definition and Definitions

The core issue is the very understanding of what archaeology is. It is not merely a question of semantics but of principles and presuppositions that condition any dis-course about further inferences—such as, precisely, the inferences addressed by Dever. If it might at first seem otherwise, it is perhaps because of a confusion between definition and definitions. The latter, and looser, term, *definitions*, implies no more than a common-sense approach to the task of segmenting into conceptual categories the universe of discourse. Such are, for instance, the *definitions* in a dictionary, which in fact are paraphrases or descriptions. Having established that a term refers to a given item (let us say, a horse), one singles out the attributes of the same item that appear most distinctive (a quadruped, with a certain type of tail, etc.), and one evokes thereby a picture to which the term can properly be said to apply. On the other hand, *definition*, understood in the stricter sense of the term as the act of defining, implies that we make explicit the boundaries of a concept by way of contrasting it with all pertinent and related concepts within a given structural system. One might say that in this second approach one is concerned not so much with what is *within* the boundaries of a concept as with what is *outside* of them. It is in fact this contrast with immediate neighbors that maximally and explicitly circumscribes any part of a given whole.

One may remark in this connection that the application of a binary system of contrasts is often preferable in insuring a proper definition of concepts. By focusing on complete dichotomies, a binary system provides for the most explicit boundaries. Two components of a binary pair are intrinsically self-limiting, contrasting parts of a given whole—they are, as one would properly say, mutually exclusive. Such complete discreetness is the best guarantee for effective analysis, a process whereby we "dissolve" (as the etymology of the term *analysis* would have it) a given whole into its component parts. Analysis or "dissolution" of this sort will obviously be most successful if no overlapping of "dissolved" components is permitted—or, as one again would properly say, if the attributes are indeed mutually exclusive.

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1. I am taking some liberty in the translation of this passage from the Mesopotamian *Dialogue of Pessimism* (Lambert 1967: 149, lines 76–78). The original of the last line cited reads, "who was the doer of evil deeds and who the one who brought help?" It is remarkable how the text explicitly assumes that one can differentiate between ancient and recent finds ("the skulls of the ancient and the recent ones": *gulgullē ša arkûti u panûti*) and then asks the question about possible higher-level interpretations of the finds (the moral quality of the individuals behind the skulls: *ayyû bēl lemuttim-ma ayyû bēl usāti?*).

A concept, then, is defined by having its boundaries established vis-à-vis other concepts—the sharper the definition, the more powerful the concept. A concept exists as a function of its boundaries; that is, we recognize the boundaries first and then we name the concept that those boundaries in fact delimit. The term used for a concept is no more than a label applied to a segment of a structural system: the label as such has no conceptual power, other than as an index. It emerges from all of this that a *definition*, understood as the process of de-fining (etymologically, to articulate the limit), is something more meaningful than a simple paraphrase: we are concerned with the very structure of a conceptual system as a whole and with the correlations and reciprocal delimitations of its component parts, rather than with individual concepts in themselves.

The Grip of the Earth

In practical terms, the concepts discussed above may be understood to mean that archaeology ought to be defined in terms that make explicit what it is that no one other than an archaeologist does. Instead of "archaeology as anthropology" or as anything else, we ought to look explicitly at "archaeology as archaeology." There is, in my view, only one answer to this question, or rather, two closely related answers. The first is rooted in the physical dimension and defines archaeology *stricto sensu* as the stratigraphic analysis, through excavation, of cultural remains embedded in the ground. The second builds on the inferences that can be drawn from the disentangled stratigraphy and defines archaeology *lato sensu* as the study of broken traditions.

1. In a strict sense, then, archaeology should be viewed as the *stratigraphic analysis of cultural remains*, first as they are found embedded in the ground (emplacement) and then as they can be understood to have gotten there (deposition).

Since *emplacement* is the only aspect of the archaeological universe that we can properly document, it is the foundation of everything else that can be said about archaeology. This statement may seem too radical, but in fact no one else but archaeologists can, and must, document what is in the ground and how it relates to everything else that is there as well. The grip of the earth masks everything. It must be lifted, and this process of disentanglement itself must be documented, not just the pieces that emerge from it. Emplacement refers to how "things" are in a complex matrix that includes other "things"—whether objects (typologically identifiable separately from the context in which they are embedded) or not (not so identifiable). As archaeologists, we do not "enter" a room. We disentangle a brick today, another tomorrow (or maybe next year), until the room is reconstituted in its typological identity and can then be "entered"—by the architect, the anthropologist, the art historian, the historian of religion (if the room happens to have a cultic function). It may well be (in fact, it ought to be) the same person who reasons along all of these lines of inquiry, or who at least has a sensibility for all the pertinent dimensions. But the fundamental commitment that must precede everything else is to emplacement and the fundamental obligation is to the record that is made of it. This no one else but the archaeologist can do.

Halfway between the emplacement record and functional analysis (artistic, sociological, religious, etc.) lies the reconstruction of depositional history. *Deposition* is how things got to where they are when found. It is important to note that we do not observe, and therefore we cannot document, deposition. It can only be inferred from emplacement. When we call a given feature a "foundation," we are making a depositional judgment. What we observe is the emplacement of elements such as (a) the juxtaposition of two different kinds of soil, (b) different planes that define the boundaries within which the two types of soil are contained, some aligned vertically and others horizontally, (c) the presence of bricks laid within the inner soil, and (d) the regularity with which these bricks continue above the upper horizontal boundary of the soil. All of this can be observed and documented. On this we build a depositional inference, and we speak (in slightly different order) of (b) a trench defined by a cut and the floor above it, (a) the fill within the trench, and (c) the brick foundation of (d) a brick wall. This inference is by definition interpretive, and must be kept separate from what is in fact observed and documented (the emplacement). It goes without saying that in practice we short-circuit the process and speak of a foundation the moment we see it. But this ought to be only a mental shortcut, not a mixing of levels of analysis.

The inferential argument that takes us from emplacement to deposition is also something that the archaeologist alone can adequately produce. And this is what is known as *stratigraphic analysis*. It rests on a full understanding of how observation ought to be carried out and on a sophisticated recognition of depositional patterns and laws. There is a constant interchange between the two, emplacement and deposition. In particular, the strategy of excavation (the unraveling of the emplacement) rests directly on presuppositions about how things that we still only partially see in the ground have gotten there (the inference about the depositional sequence). Thus, we must argue emplacement from deposition, even while keeping the two lines of reasoning quite distinct. These concerns add up to a proper theory of excavation, something to which very little atten-

tion is being paid, even in an era when theory dominates so much of our scholarly attention.

2. In a broader and secondary sense, archaeology can be understood as *the study of broken traditions*. The cultural remains that we extricate from their own collapse exhibit no direct line of continuity with our current experience; there are no living carriers of the culture from which they originate. They bear within themselves a cipher, as it were, that we must discover, so as to "de-cipher" their meaning. And so we must recompose a cultural whole within which they may make sense once more. Just as there are "dead languages," so there are "dead cultures"— not because they never lived, but simply because no living person has today the linguistic or cultural competence to tell us what that whole is. What is done to retrieve meaning within a dead culture only the archaeologist can do. For it is the archaeologist who is trained to correlate assemblages that are linked stratigraphically and to insert each new fragment that is brought to light within its own pertinent framework.

In this secondary sense of "archaeology," the time gap between deposition and excavation is not that critical—in other words, it is not necessary that the archaeological material be "ancient." There can be very recent cultures, the meaning of the material remains of which escapes us, and more ancient cultures for which filaments of continuity can be detected, generally among populations that inhabit the same territory. And this is the philosophical presupposition for the validity of ethno-archaeology—the recovery of these filaments.

The Great Disconnect

Relating the case of an extraordinary autistic person—a woman by the name of Temple Gardin who went on to join the faculty of Colorado State University—Sacks quotes her as saying: "Much of the time I feel like an anthropologist on Mars" (1995: 259).[2] This is a profound statement on which the author elaborates with great insight, describing the ways in which Gardin could relate to the world of feelings only via abstract thought. Thus, he writes that "she could understand 'simple, strong, universal' emotions but was stumped by more complex emotions and the games people play" (Sacks 1995: 259). For her, " 'normality' had been revealed more and more . . . as a sort of front, or façade . . . albeit a brave and often brilliant front, behind which she remained, in some ways, as far 'outside,' as unconnected, as ever. 'I can really relate to Data,' she said . . . an android [from the TV series *Star Trek*] who, for

2. The same quotation is also cited in Sacks 1995: 269, 292, and is obviously the quotation borrowed for the title of Sacks's book (and of my article).

all his emotionlessness, has a great curiosity, a wistfulness, about being human. He observes human behavior minutely, and sometimes impersonates it, but longs, above all, to *be* human" (Sacks 1995: 275).

Sacks relates that to obviate the great disconnect that marked Gardin's experiential range, she "built up a vast library of experiences. . . . They were like a library of videotapes, which she could play in her mind and inspect at any time—'videos' of how people behaved in different circumstances. She would play these over and over again and learn, by degrees, to correlate what she saw, so that she could then predict how people in similar circumstances might act" (1995: 259–60). Sacks explains that, "when she was younger, she was hardly able to interpret even the simplest expressions of emotion; she learned to 'decode' them later, without necessarily feeling them" (1995: 269), and that "she has . . . to 'compute' others' intentions and states of mind, to try to make algorithmic, explicit, what for the rest of us is second nature" (1995: 270).

The parallel with our case is illuminating. The cultural remains unearthed by the archaeologist are buried not only physically but also metaphorically. They are separated from our reach by the physical cover of their own collapse and of the accumulations that followed on top; but they are also separated from our immediate understanding by the great rift caused by a time gap that has severed direct continuity. They are the mute evidence of, precisely, broken traditions. For the archaeologist, the break is vertical, as it were, across time, whereas for the autistic person studied by Sacks, it is horizontal, because of the makeup of her personality. Thus, we as scholars approach the broken traditions recovered from the earth much as an autistic person would approach normal human interaction—before them, we remain "far outside," "unconnnected," "emotionless." We are always "archaeologists on Mars," because we cannot presume continuity but must instead supply the argument that takes the place of intuitive understanding.

We do this through the methodical and laborious identification of patterns that we know must have carried meaning. Even when we do not comprehend the meaning, we may legitimately assume it. But we can never presume to suggest meaning if we have not first established the regularity of patterns. The alternative is pure fantasy, the domain of storytellers. As scholars, we can only start from established patterns. Akin to semiotics, cognitive archaeology lays the groundwork for this kind of effort. In linguistics, semiotics reads value into signs that are shown to have significance because they are recurrent. Archaeology in and of itself can attribute meaning without presuming to define its proper value. But cognitive archaeology accomplishes this by establishing higher levels of correlation. Interestingly, Gardin described her effort at reading meaning

into emotions in terms of cognitive analysis: "I had to learn it cognitively. I could put two and two together [in order to know that a colleague was jealous], but I couldn't see the jealous look on his face" (Sacks 1995: 260).

But can we, too, as archaeologists, go beyond the cold description of these patterns and presume to propose meaning? Can we re-embed past experiences in our own experience without fantasizing about them?

Healing the Rift

The distinction and relation between social sciences and humanities lie at the core of our answer. A humanistic approach aims at recapturing for our live experience another experience that is "dead," not in the sense that it never lived, but rather in the sense that its carriers no longer live. The humanistic conviction is that patterns originate in experience, that they are handed down through culture, and that assimilating the patterns can lead us back to their experiential source. The scholarly dimension of humanism is in the careful grounding of such renewed experience upon definable patterns. These can be described as part of the factual record—hence documented, dissected, and analyzed. But beyond the patterns, or beneath them, we can identify with that magical moment that is the recreated experience. It is as if the humanist could lend a sense of wholeness to the fragments.

Against the backdrop of the experiences described by Sacks, we can think of the social scientist as laboring in the way an autistic person does, creating libraries of data and identifying correlations that presume meaning, and of the humanist as pointing to the nexus that holds the fragments together. Once more, this reminds us of Temple Gardin: as a child, she knew that "something was going on between the other kids, something swift, subtle, constantly changing—an exchange of meanings, a negotiation, a swiftness of understanding so remarkable that she wondered if they were all telepathic. She is not aware of the existence of these social signals. She can infer them, she says, but she herself cannot perceive them, cannot participate in this magical communication directly, or conceive the many-leveled kaleidoscopic states of mind behind it. Knowing this intellectually, she does her best to compensate, bringing immense intellectual effort and computational power to bear on matters that others understand with unthinking ease. This is why she often feels excluded, an alien" (Sacks 1995: 272).

Not so with us. We need not be *either* social scientists *or* humanists. We must be both. We can and must internalize once again the "exchange of meanings." The experience of the ancients, broken though it is, can be reinserted in ours—not in a fantastic mode but through scholarly reasoning.

In this sense, archaeology can be seen as paradigmatic. It starts with the greatest distance—the mute testimony of a material culture cut off from our experience—and ends with the resurrection of a culture and, through it, of the experience behind that culture. For this remains, ultimately, the goal of every archaeological endeavor. We may feel like archaeologists on Mars, without initial points of reference except for the internal coherence of the data and the recognition of patterns that emerge from them. But unlike the autistic experience, and unlike, as a matter of fact, an archaeologist on Mars, we can expect to find clues that can establish some continuity and thus heal the rift. In its most minimal form, this is the continuity of the most basic of human experiences. But if we can go beyond this and appropriate more specific moments and more articulate expressions of this experience, all the better.

Biblical and Other Archaeologies

The many qualifications that are in current use or have been introduced to modify the concept of *archaeology* may be grouped into three major categories. On the one hand, there are terms that reflect a global approach to the discipline, such as "new archaeology." On the other, there are terms that apply to specific sectors of the discipline in reference to methods or techniques, such as "underwater archaeology," "ethno-archaeology," and even "archaeometry." Finally, there are qualifications that refer to specific sectors of cultural data to which archaeology applies, as in "classical" or "Near Eastern" archaeology.

The notion of "Biblical Archaeology" would seem to belong to the last. But if one thinks about it, it is rather anomalous to speak of the archaeology of a book. It would be like speaking of "Livian Archaeology." These terms might be understood as answering the question what can archaeology tell us about the facts referred to in the Bible or in Livy. And to this extent, they are acceptable concepts. But two major problems quickly arise if one goes beyond this simple understanding of the term.

1. As documents, the Bible and Livy belong to a continuous manuscript tradition that began at some remove from the time of the initial composition. The stream of actual philological witnesses (essentially codices) begins later, at some distance in time from the original "edition." The portion of the textual tradition that precedes the extant manuscript tradition is indeed presupposed by the latter but not documented. It is "broken" in a literal sense. Thus, the first problem is that we are tempted to deal with these particular textual traditions as if they instead were closed traditions, carrying with them a documentable contextual understanding. In addition, the manuscript tradition, as we have it, is a cultural carrier that elaborates, interprets, and interjects at the same time as it hands down the text—not

within the text itself, but as an interpretive apparatus that develops concurrently with the text. Thus it is that the Bible or the Livy of the manuscript tradition is an artifact that must also be understood in stratigraphic terms, as it were—that is, detached from the (later) chain of witnesses (interestingly, this is the thrust of Dever's 2001 volume title, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*).

2. Another consideration is that, while the concept of "Biblical" or "Livian" Archaeology is valid and legitimate, it is of limited power and potentially harmful as well. It has limited conceptual power because it properly refers only to the correlation between stratigraphic data on the one hand and cultural data filtered through a partly undocumented manuscript tradition on the other. It is potentially harmful because it may lead to an undue superposition of goals. Imagine a dig or a series of digs undertaken with the express purpose of illustrating Livy's work, let alone of proving him right. The overlap would be so limited that if the excavators were to be true to their stated intents, they would effectively destroy and leave undocumented most of the archaeological record. While we can hardly expect this to happen in actual practice, the mixing of levels of analysis is sufficiently dangerous to elicit special attention.

Thus, the case of Biblical Archaeology is the most dramatic example of the potential contrast between a broken and a continuous tradition. The pertinent archaeological record is, in effect, a broken tradition that is claimed by a continuous tradition as part of itself. And while there are compelling reasons that this often ends up being the case, we cannot accept that one should override the other.

To conclude, we may consider a comparison that is instructive and ironic at the same time—the comparison between Biblical Archaeology and ethno-archaeology. Ethno-archaeology pays careful attention to the survival, however opaque, of ancient cultural features in the life of modern living groups. The analogy with Biblical Archaeology is that the latter pays just as much attention to the survival of equally ancient cultural features in a later written record. The irony is that ethno-archaeology should be accepted with an enthusiasm that is often only matched by the skepticism directed instead toward Biblical Archaeology. The reason is that the biblical written record has a higher degree of awareness of its past than ethnographic survivals, and this generates the suspicion of a hidden agenda. But precisely for this reason, the comparison with ethno-archaeology is instructive, because ethno-archaeology may serve as a good paradigm for understanding the merits, and limits, of Biblical Archaeology. In both cases, we seek to verify the validity of assumed continuities that bridge the gap, the brokenness. Such assumed continuities cannot be accepted at face value: the validity of a link across the hiatus of the broken tradition must first be proved. To do this, no one is properly equipped but the archaeologist, in the sense that I have described above. Thus, biblical archaeologists should not be understood as the antiquarians who relate text to artifacts on the basis of mere typological analogies. Rather, as if after the fashion of a Kantian "Critique of Archaeological Reason," they ought to serve as those who calibrate the stratigraphic context of the material finds against the textual context of the written record.

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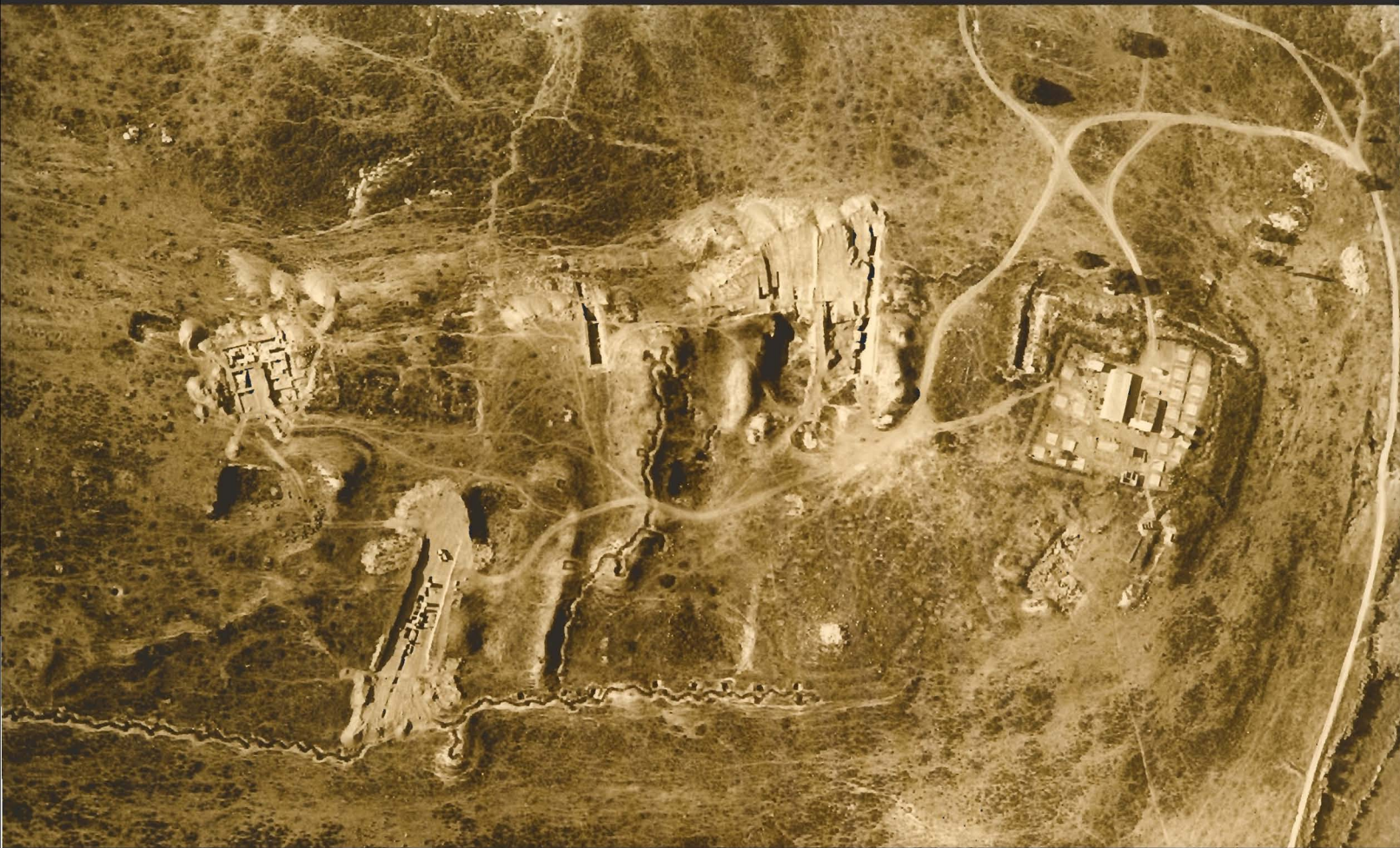
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Contents

PART 1

Archaeology

PART 2
Bible and Ancient Israel

PART 3
Ancient Near East