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Topic of the Year: Small but Kind of Mighty

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Italy to Italians.

Interview with Daniele Manacorda

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Keywords

 Daniele Manacorda, Crypta Balbi, Italy

The distinguished Italian archaeologists recalls the most significant professional experiences of his life and explains how they forged his personal views on the role of archaeology in our society, on communicating archaeology and the relationship between cultural heritage and economy. In a word: what public archaeology is all about.

This interview takes its title from Daniele Manacorda's recent work *L'Italia agli Italiani* (Bari, Edipuglia, 2014), a short but substantial book that asserts the author's past and present commitment to redesign and bolster the relationship between civil society and cultural heritage. Manacorda's passion and commitment have made him one of the great protagonists of Italian archaeology today. It is a joy and an honor to have him on Archaeostorie's Advisory Board.

For many years Manacorda has been writing a popular column entitled 'The archaeologist's job' for the magazine *Archeo*; in his articles he analyzes the multifaceted and sometimes troubled relationship between the archaeologist and issues of cultural heritage. It was in a column tucked inside a summer issue of the magazine that, two years ago, Manacorda put forward the much-debated proposal to rebuild the floor of the Colosseum's arena, whose broken ruins "demand respect in return for our rightful impulse to investigate them." Having been dismantled and fully explored, they demand to be covered up and restored to the way they once were, so that visitors can have a more meaningful experience and a better understanding of the monument. Italy's Minister of Culture, Dario Franceschini, has endorsed the idea with the promise of starting the project soon.

Daniele Manacorda is Professor of Methodology of the Archaeological Research at the University of Roma Tre. His academic interests focus mainly on the methodology of archaeological investigations carried out in urban contexts, and on the relationship between archaeology and other disciplines. He is best known for his decades-long archaeological excavation of the Crypta Balbi, in the historic center of Rome, where a museum now helps visitors understand the evolution of urban landscape from Antiquity to the present. On the Tuscan coast, after directing the excavation of the Populonia acropolis, he has coordinated the projects for the Acropolis Archaeological Park and the Piombino Archaeological Museum.

What is the role of archaeology in contemporary society?

I am tempted to answer that I don't know. I mean, I do not think there is just one answer to this question. The debate on the sense of the humanities, and in particular on the meaning of a humanistic science such as archaeology, can be approached from many different cultural perspectives and views. An unpleasant feature of the contemporary cultural debate, for example, is the presence of insiders and experts who claim to have the ultimate answer on what is archaeology, what is art, what is landscape, and so on. They simply refuse to acknowledge the possibility that there exists a plurality of voices and opinions.

I personally consider archaeology to be not merely a discipline, but also, and above all, a wonderful conceptual tool to understand our contemporary reality and ourselves as individuals. A discipline is a closed system of knowledge with its own methods and procedures, and this definition certainly applied to archaeology between the 19th and the 20th century (as did catchlines such as "Don't tug on Superman's cape" or "Stand aside and let us do our work"). Unfortunately, archaeology is still generally considered a discipline in the first place, and this misconception generates misunderstandings in the cultural debate.

Then, how does archaeology work today?

Archaeology does not focus on the multi-layered, immaterial knowledge that cultures have always displayed in their literary, philosophical or political productions (essentially books and ideas, either good or bad). Archaeology focuses on 'things', amassed into a big box that we drag around or tie up with ribbons as if it were a present. This big box contains the remains and the scraps of all previous generations of humans to this day. In other words, it contains neither Mozart's music nor the Beatles' songs, nor literary texts, nor any of the infinite forms of human immaterial actions and behaviors – gestures of love and hate, hunger and thirst, pleasure and boredom. Instead, the box does contain the countless material traces of human actions, either

derived from reason or passion.

Archaeology is the amazing tool used to identify, gather and explain the human scraps amassed over time, and make sense of them. Archaeologists are supposed to let go of their preconceptions and follow their erudite and scientific instinct in order to reconstruct as objectively as possible the original appearance of material traces. Historical truth is, of course, an unachievable target, but our desire to approach this limit value, however utopian, does wonders in refining the research methods we use to handle this heap of broken images. On the other side, however, we must be aware that our mental and cultural influences will inevitably filter any historical phenomenon we strive to understand with the help of archaeological sources. The sense we give to these fragments depends on the concerns of our present. In this tension between an objective historical reconstruction and its subjective interpretation, I believe, lies much of the fascination of our discipline.

You mentioned the influence of mental and cultural filters on our understanding of the past. Are these mental and cultural filters the reason why, for better or for worse, ideology has guided the interpretation of the archaeological record for centuries?

Yes. Archaeological remains have often been used to support political needs and agendas, such as claims for independence. Also, certain excavation results have been inflated or abused to substantiate nationalistic propaganda, while results pulling into the opposite direction were being completely disregarded.

As a matter of fact, any archaeological reading of the past is bound to reflect present feelings, interpretation tools, and systems of meaning. It is inevitable and even right: we make sense of the remains of the past not in order to manipulate them (an outcome that the methods of scientific research are supposed to prevent), but because we are aware that the traces of the past are only entitled to a future if we make sense of them in the present. If we don't, those traces will be discarded as junk, and we will be responsible for their loss. Until

one day, maybe centuries from now, a future archaeologist (or whatever they will be called) will recover that junk and try to make sense of it.

What's the public use of history in the contemporary world?

The most obvious example of a public use of history is provided by the Middle East, an area oppressed by enduring conflicts. There, archaeological remains are carefully selected and exploited to cement a sense of identity. The use of this identity, whether it is good or bad, tends to alter the original meaning of the ancient remains. Such a process may be acceptable if it promotes the diffusion of knowledge: in that case, public archaeology is a good thing. However, the past does not belong to cultural elites, which too often have welcomed its rediscovery as a distraction from a difficult present. The past belongs to everyone. In a world of advanced democracies, the public use of history or archaeology should not be entrusted to the power holders; on the contrary, the decision on whether and how to make sense of the past must be left to the people – a very eclectic entity indeed.

The current global wave of populism arises from a false assumption that reduces the people to a homogeneous and consistent reality. The people is, instead, an extremely heterogeneous reality, one that should not be beguiled into thinking that there are universally valid solutions, illusory one-size-fits-all remedies. Rather, it should be made aware that politics is that exceptionally difficult art (not a science), which must prove itself capable of constantly inventing new ideas and rules to manage the natural conflicts arising within groups and societies.

Why is the relationship between our society and the remains of the past so controversial?

Controversy arises in nations lacking a sense of the past --actually, of the plurality of meanings that the past may acquire. Countries whose economic policy is based on the ability-to-pay principle are bound to face issues when deciding to invest public money in the

management and preservation of a cultural heritage whose meaning and importance are downplayed or disregarded. An accomplished democracy shall interpret heritage as an asset that yields both cultural and economic value, and feel enriched by their continuous existence. The denial of the intrinsic worth of the cultural heritage, or its oblivion, will inevitably lead to the community's unwillingness to pay for its intangible benefits.

In Italy, the relationship between society and the remains of the past is particularly controversial because the legislation on safeguarding the cultural heritage has been in force since 1909. At that time democratic forces were only just emerging, intellectuals represented a very small, though extremely valuable, portion of the population and an even smaller portion of the government, and census-base suffrage was exclusively male. It is inevitable that such an obsolete legislation clashes with the needs and the demands of a world that in the last hundred years has totally changed.

How would you define public archaeology?

Public archaeology is a branch of archaeology which aims to improve everyone's knowledge by passing along to the community the results of academic archaeology. Experts in the field must realize that their mission consists in increasing public awareness and education about the importance and openness to interpretation of cultural heritage. This is the only way to make archaeology relevant to the public and, consequently, make sure that the each generation will in turn be given a chance to rediscover and reinterpret the past.

In Italy, however, public archaeology is mainly endorsed by certain public sectors and by academic (and not only) research institutes that believe in an approach based on competence and scientific expertise. Promoting our heritage, however, means more than just protecting it; therefore, making sense of the past cannot be the preserve of our administrative and scientific systems. Preserving and enhancing our cultural resources depends on the mobilization of the widest possible variety

of constituencies in a country. In a way, public archaeology is to our heritage as healthcare is to health: it is certainly true that healthcare consists in the provision of medical services managed by professional figures operating in a system; and yet, the healthcare system can only work effectively if it keeps a finger on the pulse of people's health.

For this reason the public management of cultural heritage makes perfect sense when the notion of "public" has an important strategic or symbolic meaning – as in the case of the Colosseum or the Uffizi Gallery, whose public and high-quality management is certainly irreplaceable. But it would be good if the amount of cultural heritage that is not taken care of properly by the public sector could be left to the creative and entrepreneurial initiatives – profit and no profit – of both Italian and foreign private entities.

How has communication increasingly affected the way you do your job?

I was lucky to get into Andrea Carandini's school when I was very young. I learned to focus primarily on stratigraphic investigation, on typological analysis of materials and on methods based on the understanding of artifacts in their context. The end goal of the analysis, however, was to be able to identify, in the opaque chronological succession of soil layers, elements that were to be analyzed in order to reconstruct a story. The communication of such stories was the topic of Andrea Carandini's book 'Stories from the Earth' (*Storie dalla Terra*, 1981, inspired by Mortimer Wheeler's *Archaeology from the Earth*): in the underground maze of entangled and apparently indecipherable structures, are hidden stories that we can unwind like a ball of yarn to knit sweaters of all shapes and colors.

This act of narration, of storytelling, increases knowledge and inspires literature, generating feelings of enjoyment that represent a sort of ethical reward for the usually public resources invested in the archaeological research. But the advantages of archaeological storytelling are also scientific: archaeologists tell stories based on stratigraphic sequences,

and the very process of storytelling inspires questions that in their turn will steer research strategies and methods of investigation into a direction consistent with the narrative. In other words, it is a virtuous circle: the storytelling inspires scientific research, which will foster more storytelling, and so on.

What have been your most impactful experiences in terms of archaeological communication?

When I was an undergraduate there was no public archaeology. I mean, public archaeology had been practiced forever, but its theory did not exist yet. As a student, my training ground were the Baths of the Swimmer in Ostia. There, the emphasis was obviously on stratigraphic investigation and data analysis, but there was room for storytelling, too: from seemingly insignificant sherds we tried to reconstruct a whole shape in order to understand where those amphoras had been produced and what products they had contained, or which ancient rooms had been lightened up by those lamps.

Later, in the Seventies, I had the good fortune to take part in another major archaeological campaign, which greatly enriched my experience: the excavation of the Roman villa of Settefinestre, near Ansedonia, under the supervision of Andrea Carandini. It was the first slave-run Roman villa to be studied with a scientific approach, and it would have been simply absurd not to make an effort to understand who lived in the different domestic areas, the people of free or servile condition who walked across those rooms during the entire period of the villa's activity, and not only at the beginning or at the end of its story.

Because of the very nature of the evidence it studies, the inner contradiction of settlement archaeology is that of focusing on two fundamental events: the birth of a building in a certain place and moment, and its death in the same place but at a different moment. The real life of a building, though, occurs in the interval between these two moments, when human activities reach a climax and, unfortunately, their traces are wiped out by the hustle and bustle of everyday routine. Therefore, when

life and humanity reach their most intense vitality, they rarely leave a mark, while the evidence we find is the product of the intense but short moments in which something is born or dies. Understanding this contradiction gives us the necessary awareness to reconstruct the whole story. Indeed an archaeologist needs not only to be able to identify the different stages of building, restoration and destruction, but also – by changing focal length – to see the people's life even where material traces are poorly preserved. Unlike archaeography, which usually describes antiquities avoiding interpretations, archaeology can truly grasp the three dimensions of reality – birth, life, and death.

What has the excavation of the Crypta Balbi meant to you?

I feel very lucky to have directed the excavations of the Crypta Balbi, a very complex site in a city-block of the historic center of Rome. There, interpreting the archaeological data in order to reconstruct and tell the stories of the site was a spontaneous, natural process. We used the same approach in our publications, and in the Museum that we set up on the site several years after the end of the excavation campaign: with the help of essentially pre-digital tools, we wove the many centuries-long storyline of a very large amount of finds.

The Museum received an award from the Society of Italian Medieval Archaeologists for the important role acknowledged to the Medieval period in its display. But in truth, the Museum simply mirrors the site, which highlights Rome's Medieval period in an unprecedented way. Unlike any other archaeological dig ever carried out before in Rome, our purpose was not that of heading straight for the monumental remains of the classical period or late antiquity; on the contrary, we proceeded by questioning backwards every single piece of evidence we met in the non-stop sequence of layers, in order to construct a narrative. Our approach was often misunderstood at first, but today's cultural environment allows a better understanding of the idea behind our method.

We could say that the Crypta Balbi

excavations actually legitimized Medieval archaeology; until that moment, Medieval excavations in Italy had been confined to non-urban, remote and isolated sites, in order to minimize the contact – and the conflict – with what was regarded by default as Archaeology – that is, classical Greek, Etruscan and Roman archaeology. Obviously, in the historic center of Rome there was no way to avoid the contact between the different periods. We solved the issue by simply according equal dignity to every kind of source from any time period. Medieval evidence in urban archaeological contexts had always been prone to destruction, and we basically turned that praxis on its head. However, I can't take all credit for that. It is just that, in the Eighties, conditions were ripe for a different approach.

Today the museum is 16 years old. Do you think updating it would improve the visitors' experience?

The Crypta Balbi museum does have its undeniable limitations. Sixteen years are a relatively short time, but compared to today's standards the Museum's services and structures are poorly managed, and even its cultural message is obsolete. At the time of its opening, in the year 2000, the museum aimed specifically to display the rich results obtained with a contextual approach and a diachronic perspective. In order to turn this concept into a tangible reality, we made a plastic model based on the equal value of all represented time periods. It was the first museum of this kind, and it needed to advocate for the legitimacy of its approach: the existence, in Rome, of an archaeological museum based on the stratigraphic interpretation of the urban landscape and the contextual reconstruction of different historical settings, was far from obvious.

The need of self-legitimation was actually a hindrance to effective communication. It may be hard for visitors to understand the exhibit, because, as is always the case with urban archaeology, the objects displayed are in an extremely fragmented state of preservation. Labels are very short, which is a good thing because they can be easily read, but on

the other side it is a bad thing because it is hard to connect label, content and context. Furthermore, the Museum does not offer multiple levels of information, although, as a matter of fact, back in 2000 I did ask to organize the Museum communication on multiple levels: big titles aimed to give even hasty visitors a general idea of the Museum; a few section labels written in a clear and simple style; and finally, object captions, containing information intended for better educated, or simply more curious, visitors. In the end we had to make do with only two levels, but adding a third one would still be feasible. Also, by implementing digital modeling and reconstruction, visual applications, sound technology, interactive design and multimedia, the Museum would become a much more visitor-friendly space, providing optimal conditions for the understanding of the events now silently trapped inside the archaeological evidence. A similar readjustment would definitely improve the Museum's experience, and make it appealing to different audiences, from young schoolchildren to Asian tourists who know fairly little of our very long history, to archaeology students and pompous professors.

How do you assess the relationship between cultural heritage and economy?

The issue is under a strong ideological pressure, which sometimes prevents true dialogue. Ideology prevails among the small group of insiders and experts in the field of cultural heritage, who consider economy a negative element, and think that culture should operate outside its domain. They have made the study of our cultural heritage their life mission, but have not much pondered the concepts we have discussed above. In the light of such assertions, I have some questions which need answering. Has there ever been, in the history of humanity, a form of cultural production developed outside a socio-economic context? Is cultural production exclusively self-referential, or is it a dimension and a project based on the creation and circulation of new ideas and new material realities, in a self-sustaining cycle? The defining trait of culture is precisely its inherent tendency to move around, proliferate,

change, intermingle, and generate more culture by getting in touch with the socio-economic reality.

And what is economy? Some people equate economics with money, the dung of the devil, the instrument of speculators and wheeler-dealers; in short, a potential evil. To me, this is a preposterous caricature of economy. Every expression of contempt for cultural commodification is itself a commodification of culture, inasmuch as it promotes the very marketable image of fighting heroes against the supporters of cultural commodification.

Instead, economics is a discipline concerned with the thoughts, factors and instruments that can determine the fulfillment of people's needs. A given population in a given historical context expresses a number of demands ranging from the need of eating and laughing to the need of sleeping and feeling good - material and immaterial needs that economics aims to fulfill. Cultural needs (and their potential fulfillment) arise in the first place from the ability to acknowledge and enhance the sense of our cultural heritage - be it a good movie, or a good glass of wine, or anything expressing the pleasure and fullness of human experience. Economic thinking is therefore the greatest ally of cultural heritage, because it offers a way of looking at people's rightful demands in order to acknowledge and fulfill them.

A starving population will hardly express the need of reading a good book or enjoying a nice show or attending an exciting soccer game (mass phenomena are cultural phenomena, too; they are expressions of a culture that needs to be understood in the first place). Nevertheless, the acknowledgement of culture might encourage even starving people to find a way out of the grip of their basic needs. When all basic needs are fulfilled, instead, people will be able to focus on the satisfaction of their equally important cultural appetites. Thus, as operators and managers of cultural heritage, we should stop looking down on economy, just as economists should understand that the cultural heritage is not - as we have always been misleadingly told - the mere legacy of physical artifacts such as paintings, statues or beautiful

landscapes carefully selected and jealously preserved in cages of increasingly depreciated gold. Those cultural categories have been dead and buried for at least a generation, and yet

they are still capable of discouraging hopes of bringing to life, also for future generations, the full potential and variety of our immense cultural heritage. We do cherish this hope.

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