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Topic of the Year: The Sublime Triangle

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What is meant by 'archaeology' today?

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To present the first issue of Archeostorie®. Journal of Public Archeology we chose the stage of TourismA, the exhibition of archaeology and cultural tourism organized every year in Florence by the magazine Archeologia Viva. On Saturday, February 18th 2017, lecturers, administrators and enthusiasts gathered to discuss the topic 'Is Italian archaeology res ... publica?'

The discussion was joined by Caterina Bon Valsassina (General director for archaeology, fine arts and landscape of MiBACT, the Italian Ministry of cultural heritage and activities and tourism), Chiara Bonacchi (University College London), Elena Calandra (Director of the MiBACT Central institute for archaeology), Andrea Carandini (President of FAI – the Italian environment fund), Gianfranco Gazzetti (National director of the Archaeological groups of Italy), Daniele Manacorda (University of Roma Tre), Akira Matsuda (University of Tokyo), Marco Milanese (University of Sassari), Valentino Nizzo (Director of the National Etruscan museum of Villa Giulia), Michele Nucciotti (University of Florence), Massimo Osanna (director of the Archaeological park of Pompeii), Andrea Pessina (Superintendent for archaeology, fine arts and landscape for the metropolitan city of Florence and the provinces of Pistoia and Prato), Luca Peyronel (University of Milan and co-director of Archeostorie®. Journal of Public Archeology), Marco Valenti (University of Siena), Giuliano Volpe (President of the MiBACT Upper council for cultural heritage), Enrico Zanini (University of Siena). Cinzia Dal Maso, journalist and co-director of Archeostorie®, Journal of Public Archeology, chaired the meeting.

We asked Daniele Manacorda, a great supporter of Archeostorie® since its very beginning, to open the workshop. Below you will find the contents of his keynote speech on the essential role archaeology plays in our world

∂ Open Access ■ Translated by: Flavio Bacci

Neywords: archaeology, public archaeology, Archeostorie

What kind of archaeology? I believe the debate in which we have been engaged for some time now should start from the significance of this question and proceed immediately to another: when we say 'archaeology,' do we really understand each other? Sometimes I have the impression we do not. So let us bring some clarity to our discussion.

I will go straight to it, taking it a little to the extreme: for me archaeology is a tool even before it is a discipline. An ecumenical tool, because we need it to know who we are, where we come from and where we are going. An essential tool to understand the matter and the spirit of which we are made, in which we live. Horizontally ecumenical, because it needs the most disparate forms of human knowledge with which to tear down intellectual and cognitive barriers. Vertically ecumenical, because it can and should reach both the most remote corridors of power

and the world's desperate migrants, because it can give one and the other an extra chance to understand what they are actually doing at that moment, what they think is best to do for themselves and for others. In short, archaeology is the GPS orienting and giving historical and relational depth to our minds and bodies. And it does not stand alone.

This was not what archaeology was in the mid-eighteenth century. The discovery of the prehistoric age and the remote origins of Mankind; colonial expansion with the surfacing of forgotten civilizations in all corners of the earth; the explosion of the concept of historical document; the encounter with the sciences; the development of archaeology of the medieval, modern and even contemporary ages: all of these factors caused an incredible expansion of the scope but also of the tasks of archaeology.

This is precisely the point. Archaeology and

the history of art and architecture are not twin disciplines, three coloured baubles hung next to each other on the research's Christmas tree. The study of the artistic production of an era, of a geographical area, of a culture, is much closer to the history of literature or music: Dante's *Divine Comedy* and Giotto's frescoes are artistic and literary products, just as Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* are musical products; as expressions of their time, they are studied, relived, interpreted using the methods of the corresponding disciplines.

Archaeology, however, does not study 'archaeological products,' simply because they do not exist. Nothing is born 'archaeological.' The remains of past civilizations become 'archaeological' only when subjected to the methods of archaeological knowledge, regardless of their nature and quality. Archaeology is therefore a great box in which all material memories of the presence of Man on earth are virtually preserved: what remains of human labour in its endless effort to live with its peers and with the environment in which we all dwell.

Archaeology is something that - in the words of Quintilian (Institutio oratoria, 1.4.1) "plus habet in recessu quam fronte promittit" - contains much more than it would seem. Much more. If we don't dissipate the mists surrounding this inveterate misunderstanding, we run the risk of continuing not to understand each other. Archaeology is, hence, also a mental form, a way of perceiving reality. Through its lens we look at the interwoven traces that surround us, and our daily lives acquire depth, things come to life, catching us and dragging us into the 'duration' of time. Archaeology allows us to evaluate the distance separating our own lives from those of the past, more or less remote. At the same time, it allows us to perceive their proximity through our residing on the same spaces.

This dual way of perceiving the past is not limited to the relationship between space and time; it actually involves other aspects of our associated life, of our psychology, of our anthropological condition in the present. Inhabiting our homes, we can imagine the structure that will survive its occupants and many of its furnishings, just as - behind the skin of our body - we sense our skeleton as the most enduring material part of us. The archaeological perception of ourselves places us physically and spiritually in history and invites us to consider side by side material remains and the immaterial traces of memory. It encourages us not to lose sight of the importance

of emotions, which does not mean yielding to a more irrational archaeology but rather to a more human archaeology, capable of practicing irony, especially on itself. 'Things' of the past put people in an uninterrupted flow that preserves the fragments of an infinite puzzle which – if it only could be reassembled – would restore to us the fantastic image of ourselves yesterday, today and tomorrow.

Umberto Eco once wrote a beautiful sentence: "People who don't read will, at the age of 70, have lived only one life: their own. Those who read will have lived 5,000 years: they were there when Cain killed Abel, when Renzo married Lucia, when Leopardi admired the Infinite... because reading is immortality backwards." In the same vein, I would like to say that archaeology is a tool which allows us to live the lives of others: a way to glean infinity and not die.

The overwhelming 'presence' of the present seems to suggest that there is only the new ahead of us, something escaping our possibility of knowledge. This drive to consider only the future certainly explains some aspects of contemporary anxiety. But, though it is naive to continue believing that history repeats itself and that the mistakes of the past can be avoided, our need for history as a search for an awareness of the stratification of human and social experience and its consequences, ultimately as an endless search for ourselves, remains intact.

"Accepting our past, acknowledging that our lives have gone in a certain way so far - wrote the psychiatrist Giovanni Jervis - is one of the conditions for not poisoning our existence and that of others." The use we make of our personal past affects our way of thinking; it can change the effects of 'what was' on 'what is and what will be.' While this is true in the field of personal experience, in the dimension of the collective past 'accepting' history does not mean justifying it, but understanding it, and feeling its weight in the construction of the future of each and every one of us.

Digging through the past is a mental operation that archaeology turns into an operative practice supported by a complex system of theories, methods and procedures, which represent not only the professional but also the ethical scaffolding of the discipline. Its ethicality lies in the propensity not to raise reassuring barriers, but rather to invade the field: not in order to steal the apples, but to swap seeds, contaminate cultures and individuals, guided

by our intellectual and human curiosity and respect for others - which is quite a different thing from a hypocritical respect for ideas. And if archaeology is not, and can never be, neutral, its ethics consists in the professional awareness that there is not just one 'public' but lots of different 'publics,' and that in actual fact there is no 'public,' but just people. Each person carries an inner world and when approaching a cultural institution, a site, a museum, a work of art, they would like to leave feeling that they have been the protagonist of an exchange.

The ethical character of archaeology lies in its ability to identify itself with the most material aspects of reality and, at the same time, to observe it from afar in space and time. All of this because

of its enviable prerogative of being able to travel in the infinitely great and in the infinitely small, as only physics seems to know how; because of its fascinating ability to get your hands dirty while keeping your mind and soul clean; and, perhaps, because of its disquieting and yet necessary penchant for sticking its nose in other people's business, and in other people's disciplines, without denying the need for specialization but acknowledging the urgent need of a more global and educated understanding of the world in which we operate, of the past world we study and of the present world for which we study. And all because the charm of the past is pointless without our curiosity for the modern and the future.



