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THE MATERIALITY OF CULTURAL INFORMATION AND ITS ABSENCE: DIGITAL CURATION FROM AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Digital curation, perceived as the process of de-materializing cultural objects in order to preserve them, challenges the very nature of archaeology as a discipline. While creating a different kind of materiality, digital curation transforms archaeological data into cultural information and, by doing that, it precipitates a rethinking of archaeological and recording practices and reveals important insights about their constitutive parts and methods of assessment.

The aim of the paper is to examine documentation processes and digital curation within the framework of recent archaeological discussions about the materiality of social life, and investigate their impact on the management, production and utilization of cultural information. The paper will discuss the role of materiality in archaeological interpretations, highlight its importance in archaeological and documentation practices and its connection to new media and argue for the necessity to make productive the insights we gain from digital curation in order to manage and utilize more effectively cultural heritage.

INTRODUCTION

"An archaeological find is only as good as the notes upon it" (Taylor 1948: 154)

The documentation of material culture can be perceived as presenting a paradox, since it is the process out of which cultural objects are in a sense de-materialized in order to be preserved. This paradox challenges the very nature of archaeology as a discipline, because it implies that there is something more, something beyond the physical existence of things that one needs to capture in order to secure historical knowledge.

The case of unpublished archaeological evidence is probably the best to illustrate the significance of this problem. It presents our failure to cope with documentation processes and is a clear indication that the properties of materials are not enough to secure historical knowledge. Being inaccessible for use and lacking any kind of "metadata", unpublished material, regardless of its physical presence, has no historical value and it is in reality "non-existent" for research purposes.

The Museum environment is slightly different. Cultural objects seem to have nothing to loose from their aesthetic value, if some labels are incomplete or if some objects remain unidentifiable, owing to the lack of any other additional information apart from the description of their material. The connection between aesthetic appreciation and historical knowledge is, however, always acknowledged and today's increasing interest in the biographies of things attests to the predominance of documentation processes that go beyond description and place emphasis to the contextualization of cultural objects.

Digital technology has always been an immense field of potential for recording and managing archaeological material and the current discussions on digital curation, namely the process of establishing and developing long term repositories of digital assets for current and future reference, are one step further towards the security of the content of cultural information and its enhancement.

Materiality and the role of archaeology are usually discussed with reference to digital preservation, as exemplified by the very popular phrase of Peter Brantley, Executive

Director of the Digital Library Foundation that the problem of digital preservation is not one for future librarians but for future archaeologists.

In the present paper, however, I would like to discuss materiality from a different perspective and drawing from discussions in theoretical archaeology, investigate its role in different media and its impact on different research practices.

MATERIALITY, MODERNITY AND THE EFFECTUALITY OF THINGS

The notion of materiality has been discussed quite extensively in archaeology since the 60s, highlighting the functional, technological, adaptive and symbolic importance of things while, at a later period, research has focused on artefacts as consumer goods within the realm of material culture and consumption studies (Olsen 2003: 89-94).

Despite this increasing interest, however, there has been great concern about the inability of all those perspectives to incorporate within their models the materiality of social life and to acknowledge the fact that things with their physical presence can actually mark and provoke participatory experiences and become the cause of many new social configurations (Ingold 2000, Olsen 2003).

The reason for this neglect has been identified in the binary oppositions that constitute the basis of modernity as observed by the French sociologist of science Bruno Latour (1993). In analyzing the division between nature and culture, or as otherwise stated between "exact knowledge and the exercise of power" Latour emphasised the fact that societies are increasingly based on complex hybrid relations, mixes of cultures-natures, and as such any attempt to purify these entities and separate them, as anthropology has done, is bound to be unsuccessful (Latour 1993: 78, see also Ingold 2000: 44).

The critique on archaeological practices so far, has concentrated precisely on the fact that the discipline has followed this modernist understanding of the world through binary oppositions without hesitation, and in archaeological narrations there has been very little concern for the properties and competences possessed by the material world itself. Material culture is usually approached as an "incomplete representation of the past" and culture is always introduced as if it "wraps itself around the universe of material things shaping and transforming their outward surfaces without ever penetrating their interiority" (Ingold 2000: 340-41). Yet, as Olsen accurately has observed, if there is something that characterizes the history of the human kind, it must be "increasing materiality" namely the fact that "more and more tasks are delegated to non-human actors; more and more actions mediated by things" that seem to have multiple effects on people (Olsen 2003: 88).

The new direction towards a material–sensitive approach emphasizes the active role of things and, drawing from science studies, sees each object as the "ideal node in a network" (Olsen 2003: 98). Hence, instead of reducing the world to the regime of two opposing ontological realms, culture-nature, it is recognized that nearly everything happens between the two extremes, through heterogeneous networks that link all kinds of materials and entities by way of mediation and translation. This is an approach that is gaining ground in the literature, and has attracted the interest of many scholars for the new directions it might open up in relation to archaeological narrations and their ability to explore different ways in presenting and understanding the past (see for example sessions in www.**worldarchaeologicalcongress**.org).

It is, however, materiality in relation to the documentation processes that is the focus of our interest in the present paper.

MATERIALITY, DOCUMENTATION PROCESSES AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL PRACTICE

Documentation is probably the most adequate field to review the effects that the materiality of cultural objects has had over different archaeological practices and the way it was perceived by different schools of thought in the history of the discipline, because it is the process out of which material culture is, in a sense, physically re-contextualised in the current world in order to be understood (see also Baines and Brophy 2006: 237).

Documentation is first and foremost, a process of selection, a process out of which we try to make sense and capture the past, by isolating certain of its attributes through the use of language and description. The physical properties of material culture, the most tangible aspect of the past, were the first to be recorded long before the establishment of archaeology as a discipline.

From the moment the past was separated from the present and it became an object of study, collections in Museums created the illusion of an "adequate" representation of the world by "cutting objects out of specific contexts and making them "stand for" abstract wholes, becoming a metonym for a culture" (Clifford 1988: 239, see also Hooper-Greenhill 1992). Soon afterwards, a scheme of classification was elaborated for storing or displaying the objects, and the reality of the collection itself, its coherent order, would override specific histories of the object's production and appropriation and create an illusion of a relation between things which would take the place of a social relation (Clifford, ibid).

This classification was based on the morphological characteristics of objects which verified the evolutionary concept of culture. The idea of progression had an equal effect on archaeological fieldwork that was primarily concerned with the retrieval of artefacts and their placement in the correct chronological sequence neglecting any other information about the interrelationship of things (Papaconstantinou 2006: 4-8). The emphasis on cultural variability and diffusionism that characterized archaeology later, in the beginning of the century, shifted interest to cross-site or regional sequences and had as a result a greater separation of artefacts from their surrounding environment (Lucas

2001: 69-74) based on the selection of characteristics that this time favoured stylistic instead of morphological traits.

It was only in the middle of the 20th century that emphasis started shifting towards the affinities between things and with their environment, as part of the systemic approach to culture. Within this new context, archaeological sites were no longer viewed as "repositories of finds" but as loci of distinct events reflecting behavioural patterns (Lucas 2001, 58). The investigation of issues that had to do with functional aspects in society, spatial patterns, and activity areas, as well as the recognition of depositional processes and the reality of industrial archaeology in the 1960s revolutionized documentation processes in the field, and shifted emphasis from the recording of objects into more elaborate schemes that concentrate on the documentation of stratigraphic associations and the careful recording of spatial relations.

This re-contextualization of artefacts into their cultural, social or inter-subjective context, past and present, has resulted into an overload of information that develops "around" objects. An overload that seems to verify the idea of artifacts as "nodes in heterogeneous networks" in accordance to discussions in theoretical archaeology today, and is usually sustained with the help of sophisticated archaeological databases and hypertexts (Papaconstantinou 2006: 9-12).

Critique over these new approaches and the complexities they reveal, indicates the need for a re-evaluation of archaeological practices and the acknowledgment that in reality we preserve the past through publication and not through excavation (Merrillees 2000: 53) and that "the archaeologists' facts are primarily not sites or artifacts, but the textual and graphic materializations that stand in for them" (Lucas 2001: 214).

If it was not for the fear of coming a full circle, one would recall Peter Brantley's, statement that "the problem of digital preservation is not one for future librarians but for future archaeologists", and place it next to the above statements regarding archaeological

finds that seem to follow exactly the opposite direction and stress the importance of the relation between things and not things *per se*.

Where does that circle leave us in relation to materiality, then? Has materiality melted into thin air? Or is it the case that apart from the physical properties of things, there is also another kind of materiality that one should take into consideration, the one that is created out of the interaction between things, provokes participatory experiences and can become the cause of many new social configurations?

New media and the prospect of digital curation is the ideal environment to explore such questions as it seems to highlight and enhance aspects of materiality that were hidden before.

MATERIALITY, NEW MEDIA AND DIGITAL CURATION

> "You can't find anything in books that recounts the primitive experience during which the object as such constituted the human subject, because books are written to entomb this very experience, to block all access to it, and because the noise of discourse drowns out what happened in that utter silence" [(Olsen 2002: 100, Michel Serres cited after Latour 1993: 82]

"The primitive experience" that Latour refers to, "during which the object constituted the human subject", is very well known to archaeologists and comprises much of what happens in the field. Archaeological reports, on the other hand, and documentation processes, in general, can be perceived as reflecting precisely this process of "entombment" in relation with all the information and experiences that come from the field.

Digital recording and curation seem to address these shortcomings quite effectively and with their requirements for collective work create a completely new environment that constantly generates new experiences and new ways of assessment processes and collaborations. Collective work is the key phrase, here, since it really takes

documentation out of the closet and into the fresh air of inter-community access, a practice which is very different from traditional recording processes that usually transform the collective work of the field into the authoritative act of the author or authors of archaeological reports.

An example would clarify this point further:
Arcane (http://www.arcane.uni-tuebingen.de/presentation.html) is a five year research project with 125 researchers, 81 academic institutions, and 28 countries involved. Its scope is to produce a reliable relative and absolute chronology of the entire Near East and East Mediterranean area based on the synchronization of regional chronologies for the 3rd millennium BC.

In a traditional environment such a research problem would be discussed in conferences, and addressed with typological comparisons and the publication of their results. The decision to curate digitally the relevant information was born out of the need to secure cross-regional synchronization of the data and to organize the collective effort of several regional groups on the basis of a new and common methodology, a comprehensive database, new periodizations and terminologies, and the mobilization of a large segment of the scientific community.

The aim to make data widely available has created a project with a great dynamic and has lead into a variety of assessment and refining strategies for the management and the utility of archaeological information. One of the most significant parameters of the project is that it considers “only stratigraphically safe material” and concentrates on “complete assemblages discovered on sites of which archaeological sequence is beyond dispute”. As a result, it has forced a large group of scholars to evaluate their data and apply the same criteria of selection at a cross-regional basis.

The process is simple, and the medium does not really do much but create a new environment for interaction. It forces, however, commitment to principles that all

scholars share, and that in the real, distant, world, are somehow weakened and certainly entombed in texts and processes difficult to evaluate.

May be in order to understand materiality within this context one should bring in mind McLuhan's notion of media as "extension of man" and his attempt to enunciate the latency of materiality in any medium. The phrase "the content of a medium is yet another medium" (McLuhan 1964: 8), is a phrase that describes in the best way the transformation process of documentation and it is the one that unfolds the potential of digital curation. Additionally, it is significant to acknowledge calls for the reconsideration of modern media as social practice and the fact that any medium functions as a habitat rather than just as a specific material means of communication (Williams, 1977: 161-163). Hence, discussions about the materiality of new media place emphasis not so much on "substantial objects and their meaning", but rather on information overload and a new hardness of "supporting materials", a new "performativity of things and bodies" (Gurbrecht and Pfeiffer 1994: 2), notions which describe in the best way material culture and its role in history.

CONCLUSION

The idea that any medium functions as a habitat brings to mind the "habitus" that is being created by printed paper, and "the memories which are stored in the body as practices and habits" (Merleau-Ponty 1962) in relation to analogues, in our case, reports, notebooks and manuscripts. These memories and habits are very difficult to change and this is one aspect that digital technology will always have to fight. We are all familiar with colleagues that instead of the most user friendly and interactive software will always insist on having print outs of every single screen, and some times, we find, with fear, a similar comfort to analogues ourselves. However, this is not the reason to refuse to acknowledge the change that has been introduced with the new media and the whole new range of potential practices that these provide for research.

The discussion about the materiality of cultural objects runs often the risk of leading into endless philosophical debates about the nature of things, matter and reality, and all those concepts that puzzle philosophers for centuries.

It has been the aim of the present paper to think of such discussions in a different context, or to borrow Jee Lee Hong's phrase (Hong 2003), to be reminded that:

"What is at steak is not a search for the reality of the material nor the materiality of the real… but the underling constraints whose material, technological and procedural potentials have been dismissed by interpretational conventions".

Discussions in archaeology regarding materiality, and our presentation about the role of digital curation are attempts to concentrate precisely on the exploration of these "interpretational conventions" that block the material, technological and procedural potentials of research practices and limit our perception of the world.

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