

TOWARDS A PEDAGOGY FOR COMMUNICATING ARCHAEOLOGY IN AN A-HISTORICAL WORLD: MINIMAL PRINCIPLES AND DIRECTIONS

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Abstract: *In an era marked by an overwhelming presence of ephemeral information and an apparent flattening of historical perspective, the communication of archaeology faces unprecedented challenges. This paper proposes a reflection on the necessity and foundations of a pedagogy for archaeological communication, adapted to the contemporary context we term "a-historical." Characterized by the general public's difficulty in relating to the past in terms of continuity and causality, this a-historical world demands a rethinking of how archaeology, as the science of material remains, conveys its message. We argue that such a pedagogy must not be limited to the mere dissemination of scientific results, but should aim to cultivate a critical consciousness of temporality, cultural alterity, and the complexity of historical processes. The paper explores the theoretical foundations of such an approach, proposing a series of minimal principles—radical contextualization, multivocal dialogue, ethical engagement, and reflexive narrativization—and outlines concrete directions for action, from museum practices and formal education to new digital media and community archaeology.*

Introduction – Archaeology Adrift in a World of the Perpetual Present

We live in a paradoxical world. Never before in human history have we had access to such a vast amount of information about the past. Digital databases, virtual museums, documentaries with spectacular reconstructions, and a constant flow of news about new archaeological discoveries create the illusion of an unprecedented proximity to bygone eras. However, this informational abundance coexists with a phenomenon we can call "a-historicity": a structural difficulty within contemporary societies to integrate the past into a coherent narrative of becoming, to understand the complexity of historical processes, and to value the radical alterity of extinct cultures. The a-historical world is not a world without history, but one in which history is consumed in a fragmented, decontextualized, and often instrumentalized manner. The past becomes a reservoir of exotic

curiosities, a picturesque backdrop for entertainment, or a source of simplistic arguments in ephemeral identity debates¹.

In such a context, characterized by the speed of communication, the primacy of the emotional over the analytical, and the erosion of trust in expert discourse—phenomena accelerated by the "post-truth" era—archaeology finds itself in a vulnerable position². Its discourse, based on methodological rigor, the slow analysis of material sources, and the acceptance of uncertainty, risks becoming inaudible or irrelevant.

Faced with this challenge, simply intensifying efforts to "popularize" or "disseminate" archaeological knowledge proves insufficient. A paradigm shift is necessary: a move from unidirectional communication, from the expert to a passive audience, to a genuine pedagogy of archaeological communication. This does not mean turning archaeologists into teachers in the traditional sense, but rather infusing every act of public communication—be it a museum exhibition, an open excavation site, a press article, or a social media post—with a profound educational intentionality³. The ultimate goal is not just to inform, but to form: to provide the public with the conceptual and critical tools to relate meaningfully to the material past and, by extension, to their own historical condition.

This study aims to explore the theoretical and practical foundations of such a pedagogy. We will begin by analyzing the concept of an "archaeology of communication" to understand how the discipline itself can reflect on its own processes of knowledge construction. Subsequently, we will articulate four minimal principles that should guide this pedagogy and suggest several concrete directions for implementation, adapted to the contemporary media and social landscape.

1. Theoretical Foundations: Towards an Archaeology of Communication

Before designing a pedagogy for communicating archaeology, it is necessary to understand that archaeology itself is, in its essence, an act of communication. It is an effort to translate the silent language of material remains into an intelligible discourse about the past. This translation process, however, is never neutral. Post-processual theories in archaeology have convincingly emphasized that archaeological interpretation is a hermeneutic act, influenced by the social, political, and cultural context of the archaeologist. Archaeological

¹ Massimo Vidale, *Archeologia, teorie, metodi, strumenti*, Carocci Editore /Manuali, 2024.

² John Carman, *Archaeology and Heritage: An Introduction* (Continuum, 2002);

³ Laia Colomer (ed.), *Public Archaeology in the 21st Century: A Global Report* (Archaeopress, 2007).

data do not "speak for themselves"; they are made to speak through our theoretical frameworks, the questions we ask, and the narratives we construct.

A pedagogy of archaeological communication must, therefore, start from a premise of reflexivity. It must expose to the public not only what we know about the past, but also how we came to know it, what the limits of our knowledge are, and what alternative interpretations exist. This implies an "archaeology of communication"—a self-analysis of how the discipline constructs, validates, and disseminates knowledge.

A central theoretical pillar for this approach is provided by public archaeology. Moving beyond the initial view that equated it with Cultural Resource Management, modern public archaeology focuses on the dialogical relationship between archaeologists and various communities. It recognizes that the public is not a homogeneous, passive recipient, but an ensemble of actors with diverse interests, knowledge, and perspectives on heritage. An effective pedagogy must be anchored in the principles of public archaeology, which advocate for inclusion, collaboration, and social relevance⁴.

Another crucial theoretical foundation is critical pedagogy, as captured in the now-classic work of Paulo Freire⁵. This approach argues that education is not a simple transfer of information but an act of "conscientização" (consciousness-raising), through which individuals become capable of critically analyzing their own reality. Applied to archaeological communication, critical pedagogy urges us to move beyond monolithic and often elitist narratives about the past. Instead of presenting history as a triumphal march of civilizations or a succession of inevitable events, we are obliged to also explore subaltern voices, conflicts, failures, and discontinuities. Such an approach can transform the public's perception of archaeology from a discipline about "old things" into a powerful tool for understanding the mechanisms of power, inequality, and social change over time.

In the a-historical and post-truth context, this theoretical grounding becomes vital. When facts are questioned and alternative narratives (including pseudoscientific ones) proliferate, archaeology cannot win the battle for credibility merely by asserting its scientific authority. It must win the public's trust through transparency, by explaining its methods, and by demonstrating its relevance to contemporary issues. A pedagogy of archaeological communication is, ultimately, a pedagogy of critical thinking applied to the materiality of the past.

2. Minimal Principles for a New Pedagogy

⁴ Ian Hodder, *The Archaeological Process: An Introduction* (Blackwell Publishers, 1999).

⁵ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Continuum, 2005).

Drawing from these theoretical foundations, we can articulate a series of guiding principles for a pedagogy of archaeological communication adapted to the 21st century. These principles are not a rigid recipe but a flexible framework intended to orient practice in various contexts.

2.1. The Principle of Radical Contextualization

In a world of informational fragmentation, the greatest disservice we can do to the past is to present it decontextualized. A spectacular artifact, isolated in a display case or featured in a viral post, becomes a mere aesthetic curiosity, devoid of historical significance. The principle of radical contextualization imposes a constant effort to place every object, site, or archaeological phenomenon within its complex network of relationships⁶. This means:

- **Archaeological Contextualization:** Explaining not only an object's function but also its provenance (stratigraphic context), its associations with other artifacts and ecofacts, and the post-depositional processes that affected it. The public must understand that the significance of a ceramic sherd, for example, derives less from its intrinsic value and more from the information it carries about trade networks, technologies, dietary practices, or rituals.
- **Social and Cultural Contextualization:** Reconstructing, as much as possible, the social landscape in which artifacts were created and used. This involves moving beyond typological and chronological descriptions to explore themes such as social organization, gender relations, religious beliefs, or economic practices.
- **Historiographical Contextualization:** Presenting how interpretations of a site or culture have changed over time. Showing, for example, how a Dacian fortress was interpreted differently by the nationalist archaeology of the early 20th century, by Marxist archaeology, and by contemporary approaches is an essential exercise in intellectual honesty and a valuable lesson in how the present shapes our understanding of the past⁷.

2.2. The Principle of Multivocal Dialogue

Traditional archaeological discourse has been largely monologic: the expert's voice explaining the past to a silent public. An effective pedagogy for an a-historical world must replace this monologue with a multivocal dialogue⁸. This means actively recognizing and integrating other voices into the process of interpreting and communicating the past.

- **Dialogue with Local Communities:** The communities living in proximity to archaeological sites are not mere passive custodians but holders of local

⁶ Cornelius Holtorf, *Archaeology is a Brand! The Meaning of Archaeology in Contemporary Popular Culture* (Left Coast Press, 2007).

⁷ Susan E. Alcock and Robin Osborne, eds., *Classical Archaeology*, 2nd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).

⁸ Nick Merriman, ed., *Public Archaeology* (London: Routledge, 2004).

memories, traditions, and perspectives that can enrich scientific interpretation. Community archaeology projects, which actively involve residents in various stages of research, are a clear example of this principle.

- **Interdisciplinary Dialogue:** Archaeology can no longer operate in isolation. Dialogue with anthropology, sociology, genetics, chemistry, or the visual arts can open new perspectives and make archaeological discourse more relevant and appealing.
- **Dialogue with the Public:** Creating platforms (physical and digital) where the public can ask questions, express doubts, and propose their own interpretations. This does not mean abandoning scientific rigor, but rather treating the public as an intelligent partner in the process of knowledge construction. Even confronting pseudo-archaeological interpretations can become a pedagogical opportunity if approached not with ridicule, but with a transparent explanation of scientific methods and arguments.

2.3. The Principle of Ethical and Political Engagement

Archaeology is never apolitical⁹. Decisions about which sites to excavate, what stories to tell in museums, and how to manage heritage have profound political and ethical implications. To claim absolute neutrality is not only naive but also irresponsible¹⁰. A pedagogy of archaeological communication must address these dimensions head-on.

- **Ethics of Discovery and Repatriation:** Discussions about the provenance of artifacts in museum collections, the restitution of cultural property, and the rights of indigenous communities to their heritage should not be avoided. They represent crucial opportunities to educate the public about the history of colonialism and the complexities of reparatory justice.
- **Awareness of Political Instrumentalization:** The public must be equipped to recognize the ways in which archaeology is used (and abused) to legitimize nationalist agendas, territorial claims, or xenophobic discourses. A critical analysis of how certain archaeological symbols are co-opted in contemporary political discourse is an exercise in civic hygiene.
- **Relevance to the Present:** Archaeology can offer valuable perspectives on some of the most pressing current issues: climate change (through paleoclimatic studies), sustainability (by analyzing ancient agricultural systems), migration (by tracing interaction networks), or crisis management (by studying the collapse of past societies). Establishing these connections is essential to combat the perception of archaeology as an irrelevant discipline.

⁹ Bruce G. Trigger, *A History of Archaeological Thought*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2020); Paul Feyerabend, *Science in a Free Society* (London: New Left Books, 1978); Paul Feyerabend, *Farewell to Reason* (Verso Books, 1987).

¹⁰ Cătălin Pavel, *Arheologia iubirii: De la Neanderthal la Taj Mahal* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2019).

2.4. The Principle of Reflexive Narrativization

Humans understand the world through stories. Raw data, however rigorously collected, have limited impact if not integrated into a coherent and captivating narrative¹¹. However, in the post-truth era, the power of narratives can be dangerous. The principle of reflexive narrativization proposes a middle path: using the power of stories, but with a critical awareness of their construction.

- **From Artifact to Story:** The effort to translate an assemblage of artifacts and structures into a story about the lives of people in the past. This involves the use of controlled, evidence-based imagination to evoke human experiences, emotions, and dilemmas.
- **Multiple Narratives:** Presenting several possible stories that the data can support. For example, instead of presenting a single interpretation of a rich grave, we can explore alternative scenarios: was this a respected leader, a feared warrior, a usurper, or perhaps a religious figure? This teaches the public about the hypothetical and probabilistic nature of archaeological interpretation.
- **The Meta-narrative (The Story of the Story):** Including the story of the archaeological research itself within the narrative about the past. Recounting the difficulties on-site, the "eureka" moments in the lab, the heated debates among researchers, and the interpretive dead-ends humanizes the science and makes it more credible¹².

3. Minimal Directions for Action

Implementing these principles requires a multi-faceted approach that combines traditional methods with new technologies. We present below some directions for action, without claiming to exhaust the line of research¹³.

3.1. Reinventing the Museum Space

The museum remains the primary point of contact between the public and archaeology¹⁴. To become a driver of the new pedagogy, the museum must evolve from a temple of objects to a forum for ideas.

- **Problem-Oriented Exhibitions:** Exhibition design should move beyond simple chronological or typological displays. Exhibitions could be structured around

¹¹ Michael Shanks and Christopher Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice* (Cambridge University Press, 1987).

¹² Daniel Punday, "Space across Narrative Media: Towards an Archeology of Narratology," *Narrative* 25(1) (2017): 92–112, <https://doi.org/10.1353/nar.2017.0006>.

¹³ Laura Jane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006); Eric H. Cline, *Archaeology: An Introduction to the World's Greatest Sites* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016).

¹⁴ Bruce G. Trigger, *Sociocultural Evolution: Calculation and Contingency* (Wiley-Blackwell, 1998).

questions or problems (e.g., "How did people manage waste in the Roman era?"; "What does gender mean in prehistory?"), encouraging visitors to seek answers and reflect.

- **Open Laboratories and Curatorial Transparency:** Allocating spaces where the public can see specialists at work (conservators, anthropologists, illustrators) and interact with them. Labels and wall texts should include not only factual information but also open-ended questions, details about the objects' provenance, and mention of interpretive controversies.
- **Co-creative Programs:** Inviting local communities, artists, or student groups to participate in creating exhibition sections or events, thereby offering alternative perspectives on the collections.

3.2. Archaeology in Formal Education

Integrating archaeology into the school curriculum is fundamental for cultivating historical consciousness from a young age.

- **Pedagogical Kits and School Partnerships:** Developing teaching materials (artifact replicas, activity manuals, lesson plans) that teachers can use in the classroom. Museums and research institutes should establish long-term partnerships with schools in their communities.
- **Simulated "Excavations" and Practical Workshops:** Organizing hands-on activities that allow students to experience the process of archaeological discovery and interpretation. These develop critical thinking, observation skills, and teamwork.
- **Teacher Training:** Offering training courses for history teachers (and others) to familiarize them with the methods and perspectives of contemporary archaeology.

3.3. Capitalizing on New Digital Media

The digital landscape offers extraordinary opportunities but also considerable risks. A pedagogy of archaeological communication must navigate this space with intelligence and responsibility.

- **Interactive Digital Storytelling:** Using online platforms to create complex, non-linear narratives. Interactive maps, 3D models of artifacts and sites, virtual tours augmented with information, and video games based on rigorous historical scenarios can provide immersive and personalized learning experiences¹⁵.

¹⁵ H. Erich., *Archeology. An Introduction to the World's Greatest Sites*, The Teaching Company, 2016; Daniele Manacorda, *Lezioni di Archeologia*, Editori Laterza, 2025.

- **Active and Dialogical Presence on Social Media:** Archaeological institutions must use social media not just as bulletin boards, but as spaces for conversation. This involves responding to comments, organizing Q&A sessions with specialists, debunking fake news with clear arguments, and promoting a culture of civilized debate.
- **Open Science:** Publishing primary data (where possible and ethical), excavation reports, and articles in an open-access format increases transparency and trust. Excavation blogs, where archaeologists share the progress and challenges of their research in real time, are an excellent tool in this regard.

3.4. Expanding Community Archaeology

The most effective form of pedagogy is direct participation. Community archaeology projects¹⁶, where citizens work alongside archaeologists, are essential.

- **Open and Participatory Archaeological Sites:** Organizing open days, but also creating volunteer opportunities for community members in activities such as surface surveys, washing and sorting archaeological material, or documentation¹⁷.
- **Oral History and Local Memory Projects:** Correlating archaeological discoveries with the memories and stories of local inhabitants, creating a bridge between the distant and recent past.
- **Co-management of Heritage:** Involving local communities in decisions regarding the protection and enhancement of archaeological sites in their territory, thereby increasing their sense of ownership and responsibility¹⁸.

Conclusions: An Archaeology for the Future

The a-historical world, with its temptations to flatten time and ignore complexity, represents a threat not only to the discipline of archaeology but to society as a whole. A society without a deep and critical understanding of its past is a society vulnerable to manipulation, incapable of learning from its previous mistakes, and lacking the cultural resources to imagine a different future.

In this context, the communication of archaeology becomes an act of cultural resistance and civic responsibility. The transition from the mere dissemination of information to a pedagogy of communication, as outlined in this paper, is an urgent necessity. Such a pedagogy, founded on contextualization, dialogue, ethical engagement, and reflexive narrativization,

¹⁶ Gabriel Moshenska, ed., *Key Concepts in Public Archaeology* (UCL Press, 2017).

¹⁷ Colin Renfrew and Paul Bahn, eds., *Archaeology: The Key Concepts* (Routledge, 2005).

¹⁸ Colin Renfrew, Paul Bahn, Elisabeth DeMarrais, *L'essenziale di archeologia. Teoria. Metodi. Pratiche*, Terza edizione italiana, Archeologia Zanichelli, 2024.

does not aim to provide definitive and comforting answers. On the contrary, its purpose is to teach the public to ask better questions, to tolerate ambiguity, to think critically, and to appreciate the infinite diversity of human experience as it is inscribed in the fragile material archive of the Earth.

By assuming this pedagogical role, archaeology can demonstrate that it is not just a science of bones and sherds, but a vital discipline for building a more conscious and responsible future. In a world that tends to forget, archaeology can teach us the essential art of remembrance.