
Keeping Up With the Jones's: Addressing Aspects of Archaeological Representation

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Abstract: Archaeology is all about questions, and seeking the best answers for them; it has the potential to tell such wonderful tales. The issue of representing the past, primarily to an interested public, often takes a back seat to excavation or analysis. The media has mastered the art of narrative and is aware of this potential in archaeological representation. As a result, it is the media that defines archaeology in the public eye. Archaeologists need to be aware of the public's perception of their discipline and should actively work to represent themselves more effectively.

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*Who controls the past, controls the future.
Who controls the present, controls the past.*
- George Orwell, 1984

Archaeology, and archaeologists in particular, hold a tenuous place in society. Who I am, and what it is I do, holds common interest only to the point where I introduce the title of my profession. How I do it is of little interest. Why I do it and what I focus on simply does not mesh with romanticized views of tomb explorers and treasure seekers. I simply can not compete with Indiana Jones.

Archaeology is a public commodity, portrayed and consumed on a number of levels. Archaeologists interpret the past based on material culture. It is their responsibility to present what they find to one another, as well as the public. The public consumes archaeological interpretation and supports study through social programs and government funding. For a large part, it dictates through its very interest what is studied. The media is the go-between, picking and choosing that which it deems marketable. Of this medium one thing seems certain; there is usually an ulterior motive, be it profit or politics. Yet it must be acknowledged that the media has been far more successful in engaging the public than we have. Perhaps it is time we consider the success of their strategies and contemplate a more effective means of communicating ourselves. This paper hopes to illustrate the unjust means in which the media is representing archaeology and why. Furthermore, it begs the question, why are we letting this happen?

In a global community, within which we are now living, everything around us is grander in scale. Here in our urban Canadian community, there are signs of change all around us. Monster-plaza complexes are popping up in every major city; they are the current day answer to the shopping mall, appealing to those with a mega-appetite for consumption and convenience. I, myself, am a slave to them: Mega-cities, mega-movies, mega-supermarkets, mega-bookstores. It is the latter of these, the bookstore, which shall be addressed in this paper.

I have informally investigated two of these bookstores, relatively new to the Burlington region: *Chapters* and *Indigo*. By informal, I merely mean an afternoon of casual browsing. Burlington is a medium-sized city in south-central Ontario and home to population of 137, 000. Both stores are massive in scale, offering more current titles than the public library, with cappuccino and comfortable chairs in which one could lounge and browse the entire day away. They keep odd and extended hours, and judging by the parking lot, are extremely popular on any given day. They are a centre of cultural events, regularly showcasing short plays, book signings, live chamber music and the like. Therefore, I felt they would be a good place to investigate the public perception of archaeology and archaeologists. Supply and demand. This, I felt, should give me the community pulse on the past.

Archaeologists

Archaeology has had diversified cultural use throughout its relatively short history. It has been practiced in order to preserve the material culture of the past before expansion paves it over and it fades from memory. It has also been used as a powerful political device to establish territorial or genetic rights (Arnold 1996), nationalist pride, or colonialist justification (Trigger 1996:615). Perhaps most popularly, it has been a source of prestigious wealth and treasure, it investigates unexplained mysteries, comes face to face with the exotic "Other," it is the epitome of excitement, adventure, and most especially, romance (Gero and Root 1996:538). Today, while any one of these characteristics may or may not be involved, the practitioners of archaeology do believe it serves a more profound purpose. We are not simply chroniclers of human accomplishment. We seek, at least in part, to better understand ourselves through understanding our history, written or not. Perhaps it is the closest we can come to scientifically validated prophecy; we hope to learn from our past in order to prepare for, if not predict, our future.

The Public

In order for archaeology to have a social use, it must be recognized as valuable by the community. The average, unspecialized but interested consumer has a sad tendency to be under-addressed, as professional literature is generally available as dry, technically laden theory or encyclopedic definition. But who consumes archaeology and in what forms is it available? These are the questions that Cannon and Cannon (1996), Feder (1984), Gero and Root (1996), and Haas

(1996) have addressed, at least in part, in their respective studies. There seems to be a preconceived notion of the popularity of archaeology in society, a notion which Cannon and Cannon (1996) have contested in their survey of Canadian museum visitors (active archaeology consumers). Their results suggest that, "... interest in the subject may not be as widespread or evenly developed as some archaeologists might assume" (Cannon and Cannon 1996:37).

Museums are clearly the most obvious and available interactive medium for scientific or academically fostered archaeological study within a community. Haas (1996: SI) considers museums popular, "...where a broad cross section of the public comes voluntarily...." But the aforementioned authors found that the majority of museum visitors were out-of Province or foreign and for the most part, highly educated. Clearly, this is not a cross section of the general community. Archaeology, however, *has* reached the public in less polished forms as sensationalist fiction laced with just enough truth to make it "conceivable." But the public can only consume that which is made available to them. It is the media which interfaces with the public for the most part, catering to the popular image of the legendary archaeologist/adventurer in everything from newspaper articles to video games.

The Media

Newspapers, magazines, television, movies, video games and the internet have all exploited the lure of the 'adventure' and mystery perceived in archaeological study in order to interest their public, to make money, and to deliver their political, religious or moral agenda (in particular see Gero and Root (1996) regarding *National Geographic* magazine). So, too, have book publishers. But is it the media which is responsible for fabricating and popularizing these images, or do they merely respond to public demands? I suggest it is a little of both.

Sci.archaeology and *alt.archaeology* are the two primary archaeology newsgroups available on the internet. The groups are equally as popular, and many messages are cross-posted between the two. No password or membership is required and the groups are unmoderated; whoever wishes to participate in discussion may do so. Primary exchanges on the groups over the final months of 1997 concerned the following subjects; "About Myths," "Moses," "Pyramid Origins," "The Truth About Giza???", "Valid Atlantis Theory," "Ark of the Covenant, Found?," "In Search of Noah's Ark," "Transpacific Trading Networks," and "Happy 6000th Birthday Earth." Many of these discussions are cross posted with newsgroups such as *alt.prophecies*, *nostradamus*, *alt.religion.Christian*, *alt.religion.jehovahs*, and *soc.history*. There seems to be a clear interest in religion, hyper-diffusion or excessive theories of New World population, pseudo-science and origins, and all apparently are deemed appropriate for archaeological discussion on this medium. The focus on religion and prophecy is particularly interesting in light of the new millennium. These themes appear to have been taken up in the news media of late as well. The front

page of the *Hamilton Spectator*, a local daily newspaper, dated Wednesday, November 19, 1997 reads, "Does the CIA hold secret photos of Noah's Ark?: Satellites, spy planes documented Ararat Anomaly." On the weekend of November 15th, television news media sources broadcast the archaeological discovery of Mary's resting stone in Israel, the site where Mary was purported to have rested on her way to Bethlehem where she would give birth to her son. The find was of "great political and religious significance," the reports stated, being found on land that is contested between Israelis and Palestinians. Archaeology and scientifically derived evidence, then, is often misconstrued and used to validate religious moral and political claims.

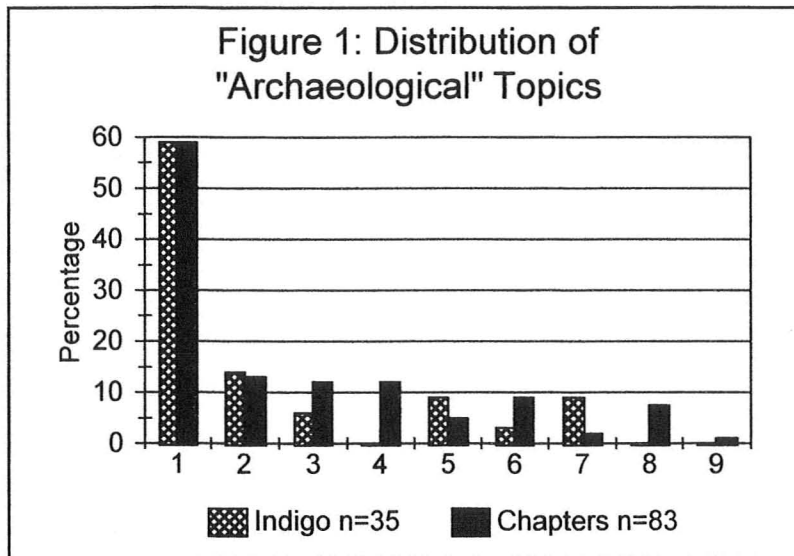
Bookstores: Data Collection

Currently available book titles from *Chapters* or *Indigo* illustrate a clear preference for Western civilizations, Egypt and the great archaeological "mysteries" such as Stonehenge and Atlantis. On a recent visit to both bookstores, undertaken on the same day, the titles of all available "archaeology" sources were recorded, which had a subject of focus other than a general introduction or encyclopedia of terminology. While I found *Indigo* to be more organized in terms of presentation, having archaeology featured within the Anthropology division, which was in turn, in the Community and Culture section, they offered only 35 titles in total. This pales in comparison to *Chapters*, which offered 83 titles in their General Archaeology division, which was found in the Ancient History section of the store. More archaeological titles could be found in separate Egypt, Greece and Roman History sections. This was interesting considering the proliferation of material available on each of these subjects in the general archaeology section as well.

Results

Book titles were organized into the following categories and calculated as a percentage of the total titles available (see Figure 1 for details). Not surprisingly, most books pertain to generalized overviews. Titles such as *Time Walkers*, *Time Detectives* and *Discovery of the Past* correlate well with a public interest in 'uncovering' that which is hidden or buried. Time, or the passing of it, are described in exploration metaphors. Such a theme is implied in such titles as *Journey Through the Ice Age*, *Lost and Found: The 9000 Treasures of Troy*, and *Unearthing Atlantis: An Archaeological Odyssey*.

What is surprising, however, is the emphasis on pseudo-scientific claims. This section represents the second most popular topic delineated by these bookstores. The mysticism of Stonehenge and Atlantis are the forerunners in popularity. The next most specific area of interest is Egypt, followed by Greece and Rome, though it was interesting to note no titles were available on the latter in the Archaeology section at *Indigo*. Rather, many books pertaining to archaeological history were to be found in their respective history sections at the other end of the store. Both stores exhibit a strong bias towards Westernized development and



- 1) General Reference Archaeology
- 2) Pseudo-Science
- 3) Egyptian
- 4) Greece and Rome
- 5) Origins
- 6) Methods, Theory, Academic
- 7) European
- 8) Other cultures (i.e. Maya)
- 9) Misplaced

topics of origin, as is clear in an emphasis on Classical archaeological study and European subjects such as *Celtic Britain*, *The Ancient Celts*, and *The Neanderthal Enigma: Solving the Mystery of Modern Human Origins*. To be fair, it should be pointed out that these stores will only stock that which is in demand, and it will be classified according to where they believe the public will look for such titles.

Most disappointing, with regard to titles available in *Chapters*, was the lack of Native American topics. Archaeology seems to be equated with very specific foreign regions and the Old World Classical Civilizations, in particular. There does not appear to be much archaeology in the rest of the world, let alone our own backyard. As Cannon and Cannon (1996: 32) point out, “[a] recognized public misconception is that the most important archaeological sites are somewhere else, and that there is no important archaeology in one’s own hometown.” Despite the copious volumes of work produced on Japanese archaeology, not a single book is represented in this section. The South Pacific, Australia, Africa, and the Arctic are also not represented.

Unlike *Indigo*, *Chapters* had a separate Anthropology section. Included was a Men's Issues division. Titles such as *Family Man: Fatherhood, Housework and Gender Equity*, also *Sex, Violence and Power in Sports: Rethinking Masculinity*, and *Mightier Than the Sword: The Journal As a Path to Men's Self Discovery* were found intermixed with the Anthropology books. There appeared to be some confusion as to the literal definition of Anthropology as the study of "man" and the actual application. Yet titles reflecting fossil hominid research, ethnography, and a few archaeology titles are also included in this section, so clearly there is some grasp, though tenuous, on the holistic scope of topics covered in Anthropology.

In *Indigo*, a Native Studies section was found to be included in the same Cultural Studies division as the Archaeology titles. In *Chapters*, I discovered the Native Studies section beside Mythology and Folklore. There was not a single Native related title in the Canadian History section. It would appear as though the Native contribution to Canadian history and Western development was nil. Aboriginal interpretation of their own history, unfortunately, is associated with mythology and folk-tales. Yet there was a good selection of Indigenous Studies topics, including historical accounts and narratives though they were intermixed with several "encyclopedias" of Indigenous "tribes." There were, however, a few archaeology titles relating to Indigenous history and prehistory isolated in this section. It was also disturbing to note one very large book titled, *Primitives: Our American Heritage*. The book, however, was not about Native American "primitives," as I had first disparagingly thought. It was a mistakenly shelved book of antiques, a compendium of primitive American furniture.

Discussion

There is yet another general misconception about archaeological study which should be addressed, though neither bookstore was guilty of supporting this error. Archaeologists are frequently confused with paleontologists.

I recently asked an acquaintance of mine what he thought of when he considered "Archaeology." He is an educated man, married, works in an office and is computer savvy. His answer to my question was, "Digging in the dirt. Bones!" I asked him what he felt was the most popular archaeological site in the world, and he answered, not surprisingly but no less disappointingly, "The pyramids."

"How about Canada?," I asked. I knew it was a trick question.

"We have archaeological sites in Canada?," was his facetious retort, but it was only partly in jest. He thought it over a moment or two. "There are all those bones in Alberta somewhere, aren't there?"

This is not uncommon. Members of my own family have asked me, upon returning from the field, if I found any dinosaur bones. However, people are generally aware that the Egyptian pyramids are archaeological in nature. They do not, for the most part, consider the conflict. Both paleontologists and

archaeologists are represented in the public media in khaki shorts and pith helmets. Both dig in the dirt in an attempt to uncover some aspect of the past and both display their artifacts in museums. Both, to some degree, uncover bones. The past is the past, and one “-ologist” is as good as another. Maybe we need a new image.

If *Indigo* and *Chapters*, like internet newsgroups and my own personal acquaintances, are any indication of the current state of public interest in archaeology, then perhaps it is time to admit we have a few problems. Apparently, the general public has no clear conception of what archaeology is, where it is studied, and what it is focused upon, not to mention its theoretical, educational or simply entertaining value to society. But the public is hardly to blame. We are responsible for our own representation.

Upon investigating the results of my informal study, it would seem that almost all archaeology is related to named cultures; the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, Celts, Maya. Those that have not been named, categorized or claimed as ancestors by one culture or another, such as Atlantis, Stonehenge, and Easter Island, are considered somehow mysterious. There is little information available regarding current theoretical debates, archaeological artifacts or methodologies. This should not be surprising, as site reports have a tendency to make for dry reading. Yet there is very little scientifically or deductively based information available in popular forms of literature, particularly in the case of *Chapters*, to counter pseudo-scientific sensationalism. There is a need to make archaeological literature, produced by archaeologists, a more consumable product. As Feder (1984:525) states, “[an] important aspect of archaeology ... rests in communicating the significance of the data and research results to a fascinated, although often uninformed and credulous, public.” Recent developments in writing archaeological history are focusing on such methods of communication such as narrative and contextualization, but progress is slow. As archaeologists, we must begin to address the key factor necessary to reducing public misconception and this starts by improving our methods of communication.

There are tales to be read between the lines of today’s popular archaeological literature. Exploration, journey or quest metaphors to describe the passing of time and the uncovering of the past, seem to facilitate the journey of the ‘human’ hero. However, the focus here is not on the global ‘human,’ but the Western one. Human evolution may have begun in Africa, but cultural evolution, it would seem, began in Europe following the Ice Age, or centuries later in that region of Mesopotamia known fondly as the “cradle of civilization.” Monumental architecture including pyramids, standing stones, lost cities and tombs, is the hallmark of ‘civilization.’ There is a noted emphasis on progress, ‘civilization,’ affluence, and literacy. There is the suggestion that we have ‘advanced’ so far today by following the footprints of these ancestral societies. It would seem that those cultures without literal ‘history,’ without written record, have contributed little to this progression, this accumulation, of knowledge. We know this is not true, but why then has this stereotype persisted?

Solutions

People like a good mystery. Despite archaeological evidence which illuminates 'secrets' and answers the riddles of the Sphinx, Easter Island, Stonehenge and Atlantis, the public perceptions of these grand cultural mysteries persist, largely in part due to media reinforcement. Pseudo-science is not as much about the X-files of prehistory, as it is the denial of it. Both the media and the public question the validity of archaeological "science," rejecting its dry nature in favour of something more exciting, intriguing and ultimately, more tangible.

There is a polarization between what is being said and done by archaeologists, and what is being absorbed by the public. Knowledge and interest are influenced by popular media upon promoting their political, religious or economically influenced parable *de jour*. Such stories cater to the adventurer hero, the "Indiana Jones" among us, the romance of the past. To a large part, however, they are also manipulated by politics, used to convey tales of origins and roots, homeland and ownership. These are the opening stanzas which set the stage for epics of progress. Religion is based on faith which is a belief that things are happening as they should, as was predestined, and as is predicted. Such faith provides comfort stories of beginnings and endings. For those skeptical of such faith, religion has found a different mode of persuasion through archaeological science, with evidence and scientifically based proof. Not that academia is much different, but we are not as effective in reaching the public and balancing the scales with our own theories. Millennium narratives, and artifacts which support them, are becoming increasingly popular as the eve of the third Christian millennium fast approaches. Very little archaeological understanding is absorbed by the public as it is presented by the professional archaeologist.

Archaeology lacks context. Haas (1996: S12) suggests that:

if the academic community of anthropology fails to recognize and capitalize on the potential of museums to communicate anthropology to the public, the field is neglecting a vital opportunity to play a part in the public dialog over the issues that confront us all on a local, cultural, national and global level every day.

Grand, sweeping narratives about the development of human ideology or the consequences of agriculture are too massive in scope for the individual to identify with or be concerned about. There is a need to relate the past to the present. The media does this through a focus on origins and Western development, at once pandering to and reinforcing faulty illusions of grandeur. Religion associates the past with science to validate historic events and support claims of prophecy.

Conclusions

The communication of archaeological knowledge should be a primary concern, not just to the public but to the communities that have a vested interest in that knowledge. If the purpose of archaeology is to learn from the past, it is high time we, as archaeologists, start practicing what we preach. Popular media, the voice of politics and religions, consider it mandate that they should educate the public and have been content to profit from doing so on our behalf.

The media has played the part of the archaeologist in order to capture and profit from common fascination. Religion, politics and media have had centuries, millennia, to orchestrate the past to work in their favour. The fabricated image of the archaeologist's raiment, in pith helmet and shorts, starched clean shirt against exotic backdrop, has been used as a tool of verification and validation. The scene is rounded out with "Dr. Jones, archaeologist," the only citation required to authenticate any given claim to archaeological "fact." It is time we cast off this anachronistic garb. Digging is only a small part of what archaeologists do. This is more true today than ever before with increased sensitivity to the knowledge that material culture is a non-renewable resource. Archaeology is primarily about interpretation, the role the media has appropriated.

Perhaps it is time to turn the tables, for the *archaeologist* to play the *media*. Current technology offers a variety of means through which to connect with an interested audience, from video to cd-rom, the internet to inter-activity. Still, I cannot come down too hard on the classic media construction of Dr. Indiana Jones. As with many of my generation, he is also a childhood hero. Through him, there was something that interested me about archaeology, something beyond religious significance, gold, snakes or adversaries. There was a complexity about past cultures that I had underestimated, a hint of stories that were waiting to be told. Perhaps today's generation will find such inspiration in movies like *The English Patient*, or *Titanic*. Hopefully such interests will be strong enough to propel them past the misguided messages of these media creations.

There is still a great deal to be said for mystery and for seeking answers to the riddles of our human past. Archaeology is all about questions, and seeking the best answers for them. There is plenty of intrigue in the past without needing to fabricate or augment the past with anything more fantastic. It is through investigating these enigmas that we learn our greatest lessons in humanity with regards to adaptation, between similarities as well as differences, innovation *and* error. Current movements in the archaeological community are emerging to address the public in a more informal manner. John Terrell (1990:1) realizes that, "[storytelling] is an effective way for scientists to communicate not only with the public but [with] their research colleagues as well." The challenge now rests on our shoulders to distribute our knowledge through more effective and engaging means of communication.

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