

Chapter 3

Archaeological Interpretation: The Rhetorical Shaping of Public Memory

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of archaeological interpretation in relation to public memory. Tools from the fields of rhetoric and composition studies offer productive avenues to consider the role and responsibility of archaeologists in the earliest rhetorical shaping of public memory. Scholarship on publics and public memory apply to understanding the rhetorical process as archaeologists' texts circulate through filters of stakeholders, journalists, or other cultural heritage specialists. Case studies of texts produced during excavations at Mes Aynak, Afghanistan, and Chedworth Roman Villa, UK are rhetorically analyzed to understand their contribution to public discourses, offering insight into new approaches to ethical best practice in archaeological communication. Acknowledging the work texts is important for any author contributing to the social sphere, though there is a burden unique to archaeology as authoring history into modern cultural consciousness.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological process is destructive by nature – one can never excavate the same context again. As such, the documentation of archaeological excavation and the associated texts become the primary record to contextualize the material. Archaeology's role in interpreting sites and material culture often does not consider the burden of responsibility to shape public memory of the context destroyed through excavation. The audience of archaeological documentation is often conceived as a narrow scope of scholarly peers. However, these texts by archaeologists reverberate through various public spheres, ultimately playing a major role in shaping public memory. Understanding the nature of publics and public memory can help archaeology, as a discipline, exert more agency over the way archaeological work is communicated and interpreted by public discourse over time.

Theories from the fields of rhetoric and composition studies offer productive frameworks to consider the role and responsibility of archaeologists in the earliest rhetorical shaping of public memory. Scholarship

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on publics, audience, and the rhetorical process connecting scientific work with the public sphere applies to understanding the rhetorical process archaeologists' texts undergo as they circulate through various filters of stakeholders, journalists, or other cultural heritage specialists who interface directly with the public at museums or other public spaces. These interdisciplinary lenses provide productive new views on the issues of communicating archaeology by considering how these texts circulate after publication.

This chapter situates public memory studies in the disciplines of rhetoric and composition, establishing the application of these perspectives to the field of archaeology. While work has been published connecting rhetorical studies of public memory to the repositories of associated archaeological material at museums and monuments (Dickinson et al., 2010; Greer & Grobman, 2015; Simpson, 2006), this chapter extends this work to connect the responsibility of shaping public memory directly to archaeological excavation, the inception of the material-cultural process. Archaeologists' interpretations serve as the urtexts upon which later interpretations are built. Thus, this opens great potential for further work to address contextualizing how archaeological field interpretation interfaces with public memory.

Defining the complexity and implications of the term "public," as it refers to both the rhetorical analysis of intended audiences for archaeological documentation and the concepts of public memory (Warner, 2014; Houdek & Phillips, 2017), will establish lexical framework to explore the connections between texts and publics. The concept of the public, or many publics, are artificial constructs in a constant state of flux. Though these constructs are necessary to create an audience identity to direct information toward, there are tensions at the interface of solidified facts and a fluid concepts of public. Foundational definitions of public and public memory (Bruner, 2010; Phillips, 2010; Warner, 2014) facilitate exploration of the ethical roles archaeologists must consider as they contextualize their scientific work within the public spheres in the digital age. Further, rhetorical processes of how scientific research enters and circulates through networks will be explored in case studies of documents created and distributed during archaeological excavations (Fahnestock, 1986; Edbauer, 2010; Spinuzzi, 2008).

Using case studies of archaeological work at Mes Aynak, Afghanistan, and Chedworth Roman Villa, UK, texts created during excavations are used to investigate the rhetorical reverberations into public memory. Texts refer to those both authored by archaeologists and those texts where archaeologists contribute as experts, such as in interviews in a variety of media including print, documentary film, digital publications, and radio interviews. This author was on the field team and head of field conservation for both case study excavations, allowing for insight into the earliest rhetorical processes that lead to the creation of the texts. The case studies herein aid in recognizing that these first documents of archaeological work not only serve as the provenience of the material culture extracted from the site but also as the foundational basis of all later interpretation. Texts include documents authored by archaeologists as well as communications where the archaeologist is a contributor, such as an interviewee for other texts related to the excavation as seen in the case studies. These peripheral texts, outside of the official archaeological site documentation, are included for two reasons. First, the archaeologists have a role as contributors so it is worth considering the rhetorical ramifications of these contributions. Secondly, these texts reach publics outside of the site documentation readership and act as a contributing force in shaping public memory. Since this chapter is focused on connecting the archaeologists' role in public memory, all definitions of texts where an archaeologist may contribute are considered.

This chapter is not a critique on style of writing in archaeology and does not intend to comment on the issue of broader accessibility for archaeological site documents. The focus of how archaeologists write to communicate archaeology is another topic. Instead, this chapter focuses on what happens in the rhetorical life these texts take on as they circulate and are reinterpreted by various publics. The chain of

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