Archaeological Publication in a Digital World

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Many years ago Shepherd Frere published a report on archaeological publication that divided the levels of archaeological documentation into four; the physical site and its finds, the raw excavations records, the curated archive and, finally, a selective and informative presentation of the site on paper.[1] A fifth, divulgation in the popular press, or in books for the general reader, was an option. The question in this report was about what to do with the third level – how much of what we now call 'grey literature' should be published. The answer, given the technology of the time, was 'little or nothing'. The internet has changed all that: there is no reason why 'grey literature' should not be available to all – the York University-based Archaeological Data Service, or the Dutch EDNA, which contains the data of archaeological research (GIS data, field drawings, data tables, photographs) as well as final reports, are both excellent examples of what can be done. What is now the question is what to do about level four: the publication of a research project. Should this, too, be online? As an editor of an online archaeological journal, *Fasti On Line Documents and Research (FOLD&R)*, my answer in most cases would certainly be 'yes'. But there are problems.

The appearance of three full-scale, online publications of archaeological sites in Italy spurred me to think about the advantages and disadvantages of online publication in general and that of archaeological sites in particular.[2] The advantages are obvious: especially if there is no paywall, the full details of the site become available to anyone who wants them, providing to the general public the sort of detail normally locked inside specialist libraries. Publications online are easy to find and may be hyperlinked and searched. Catalogues can be downloaded as spreadsheets which can then be rearranged, recombined and reused at will. Colour reproduction of photographs ceases to be expensive, and we may see the last of the elegant but often dreary black and white image. Paper and printing are saved, along with the money they cost. Finally, audio files and 3D images, of objects, of the stratigraphy, and of reconstructions become available. The advantages are obvious. What is not to like?

The answers are complex, and some unfair. Electronic publications are still the stepchild of archaeological publishing. Reviews of online books are vanishingly few. Part of the snobbism may derive from the fact that the internet is open to all, so that a necessary filter appears to be missing, but this makes little sense when an online book is published by a university press or in a peer-reviewed context. The objections to reading online are familiar, and not entirely age-related: books are not susceptible to cyber-attacks, can be read anywhere, have a physical presence that can be marvellous. And there are things that books do very well indeed, like providing two pages, one of which can hold the illustration that supports the text on the other. Footnotes have always been best at the bottom of the page: flicking down to them with one's eyes is

infinitely faster than clicking on them. There are also things that printed books, by their very limitations, force you to do. Books limit space. Text is necessarily synthetic, and illustrations are worked over to provide the maximum clarity in the minimum of space. This is an important point: In recent publications line drawings have been eschewed in favour of the *realien* of walk-through site models. Access to the site database allows you to see the record sheet for the context, and the photographs taken while it is under excavation – in all its messy splendour. It is hard to know what the advantage of this deconstructed view is. For most people it is the excavator who should interpret the site, distilling it for the reader into a form that is easy and immediate to grasp – although the site archive serves to check that interpretation and permit other interpretations to emerge. Presenting archival materials, analysis and reconstruction in a single space blurs the distinctions between them, and risks burying the reader in undigested facts.

Graphic illustrations are also victims of this process. Over time, a complex symbology has developed that we all know how to read – continuous lines mean boundaries, of walls or of contexts, dashed lines indicate cuts, trench edges are indicated by dot-dash, and so on. We are used to reading these on phase plans, and it is those phase plans that are, in effect, described in the text. None of this is available from the 3D presentation of the site at a given phase, or from the record sheet, so that however detailed the text the reader is left without a clear, synthetic imagery to complement it. Even the full-dress photograph of, say, a room in a building tends to be absent. These are, of course, constructs ('that needs more cleaning,' 'the sections need to be straighter') but they are useful constructs, allowing the reader as clear a vision as possible of the ensemble.

My protest is against a form of positivism that substitutes the data for their analysis – while at the same time, providing elaborate 3D reconstructions of the spaces, reconstructions whose anchors to those images of dirt and stone are almost incomprehensible. We are, in sum, missing the intermediate phase, of synthesis and elaboration, passing straight from level 3 to level 5 (now the 3D reconstruction), without passing through synthesis and exposition.

The solution seems simple. The internet should be reserved for what it does best – levels 3 and 5, while synthesis and exposition of a large research site should remain in a printed book or journal. Stratigraphic reports, specialist reports, spreadsheets and colour images on the one hand, and 3D reconstructions and audio files on the other should be housed on the web – along with, if possible, access to the original databases for those who really want to dig down into the stratigraphy. This, of course, is tricky, as many university servers refuse interactive web sites for security reasons (the University of Michigan Press is an honourable exception). Such sites also need periodic software updates, more and more unlikely over time. However, html seems to be lasting well, and if a university host can be found that will guarantee that the site will not be discarded by a bored administrator in thirty years' time, this is a good solution. But let us, for the

moment, retain the option of the printed page for a concise, well-written and illustrated narrative of what an excavation tells us, useful to the scholar and accessible to the intelligent lay person.

Notes

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[1] Frere 1975. See also Jones et al. 2001; Richards 2004.

[2] Clarke – Montasser 2014; Luzón – Alonso Rodriguez 2017; Opitz et al. 2017: see Fentress 2018.

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