Transactions of the American Philological Association 126 (1996) 1–10

Presidential Address 1995
San Diego, California

Archaeology and Philology: The Dirt and the Word

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Ladies and gentlemen, friends and fellows, jokers of the American Philological Association and colleagues of the Archaeological Institute of America,

You APA members perpetrated a cosmic joke in electing a Bronze Age archaeologist as your president. Why did you do it, when you could have had a much more eligible philosopher or literary person? You have caused me a deal of trouble, especially in finding words for tonight. I have heard many APA presidential addresses, most of them excellent; this will be distinguished from all others in having no discernible content. As Jane Austen once put it, "Mary wished to say something sensible, but knew not how." Still, I may say, you have also given me a deal of pleasure, in relating to people like William Ziobro and Robert Kaster who have brought stability and good will into my life.

The Dirt and the Word: that is the kind of unmeaning opposition in a title, perhaps intended to evoke the AIA and the APA, sent in when a request for a title is overdue and when nothing has been thought about or written yet. But let me see what I can do to solidify this foolish contrast.

The Dirt: it supports us; we walk on it, it feeds us with crops and fruits; our neighbors the animals seek shelter from us killers across it; it also hides us and our brief doings when we are gone. It is our life first, our death later.

The Word: it separates us from the animals, or so we say in our present arrogant ignorance; it allows us to express our own inestimable creative value to ourselves; we put it in the mouth of God, and it marks a sense of our origins; it encourages us to create imaginary impalpable worlds and to control them like gods ourselves; it is our protection against death, for the Word will outlive us if we use it rightly and well and memorably.

How can these two good things, the Dirt and the Word, be in opposition? (Or, as my husband says, the Laspee and the Logos, the mud and the meaning?)

It is more than the contrast between our two organizations, the AIA representing the Dirt and the many valued and beautiful things as well as the knowedge concealed in it, the APA representing the Word that gives meaning to life. In an academic environment, unfortunately, these two essential ingredients of life and death can easily be set into polar opposition, although I never understood that until I ended up at Harvard.

At Bryn Mawr both classicists and classical archaeologists were so respected and honored no one would have made a facile opposition between the professions. But at Harvard, which is in some ways a lingering mediaeval institution, it eventually became clear to me that the low esteem felt by classical philologists toward field archaeologists was a remnant of the mediaeval tradition by which those who dealt in Dirt were felt to practice the mechanical arts, while those who dealt in the Word belonged with the liberal arts. The liberal arts are still more highly prized in academic places than the mechanical arts; the Word is still generally felt to be more powerful than, as well as cleaner than, the Dirt.

Dirt archaeologists are, in this kind of environment, much like Lord Hervey, the "Sporus" denounced as a bug in Alexander Pope's famous lines:

> Yet let me flap this bug with gilded wings,
> This painted child of dirt, that stinks and stings,
> Whose buzz the witty and the fair annoys,
> Yet wit ne'er tastes, and beauty ne'er enjoys.
> ("Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot," Prologue to the *Satires*, 309–12)

The gilded wings are, in our case, no doubt an allusion to the gold we archaeologists are ever accused of chasing and seldom find; the stink may well be for the sex and blood that make up the other two popular imaginings about archaeology, themes which the champions of the Word are, I am sure, too pure and chaste to reflect on, except perhaps in the privacy of their rooms.

On the other hand, the Dirt and the Word are, according to Dr. Johnson, intimately related: "I am not so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven." This is very nice for my purposes, that words are the daughters of earth. It explains how easily they can rearrange their mother, almost at a whim. She has little chance to protest.

This is because the Word always has the very real power to reshape the Dirt. It can recreate geography and alter it, as Alexander Pope discovered when translating Homer's *Iliad*: he and his engraver (as he wrote to Edward Blount) undertook the work of "removing mountains, altering the courses of rivers, abolishing towns"; finally "their defiance of the work of Providence went so far that they forced the Scamander to flow into the Aegean Sea instead of into the Hellespont."[1] And so much more agreeably than it would have taken engineers or armies or a god to do.

Of course one of the greatest pleasures of education is to acquire the power to recreate and read about imaginary landscapes. When it is raining outside it is a matter of moments for us to create sun trickling through the new green leaves of trees, blossoming hedges, rolling meadows, mysterious moors, or nuthatches hopping along the turf by the blinking brook.

From childhood this has been one of the powerful attractions for the internal vision, whether it be the dark bats issuing like clouds of smoke from Merlin's cave, or the starving hobbits laboring along the stinking blasted plain of Morder. These imaginary landscapes are often more "real" to us than what we see out the car window. The capacity to invent landscapes, animals, plants, clouds, palaces and gilded rooms and gardens, characters from monsters to lovers, wild seas where we do not sicken and wooden ships where we have perfect balance and dangerous enemy action where we are perpetually safe is perhaps at the core of the pleasures of life.

Almost every writer can give us private weather, terrain, new mountain ranges, exploding volcanoes, desolated forests, quickly seen animals and birds, noises of fluttering wings or howling monkeys or strange splashes from the river, and we are in no mood to check it—how could we? We know where these landscapes come from, out of memory of childhood or travel, and poetic modulations, sounds and rhythms, out of pleasure in the construction of the unreal so as to impress and enthrall us. There is no need to measure them against any standard of reality. Or these scenes form backgrounds to special episodes and characters, like a tapestry background, or painted stage settings. The Word is the medium of creation, and also of illusion and pleasure, a matter that troubled Plato who had hoped for better and truer things from men's minds.

[1]Edith Sitwell, *Alexander Pope* (Harmondsworth 1948) 95.

And in the same way, through words, most of us in this room have been beside the black ships beached at Troy, where the wind blew around the towers of the holy city, or on Sophokles' shining hill Kolonos with the nightingale among the fresh green leaves, and the ivy twining, or we have even leapt with Euripides' fawn in the green pleasures of the meadow, or followed the black shapes of Virgil's ants looting the barley pile for the winter ahead. These pleasures are said to belong to philologists and indeed all who love classical literature; and, it is also said by some, these pleasures do not and cannot belong to the archaeologist, who measures out his life in duller landscapes, measuring strata, analyzing bones, fitfully reconstructing lost history from potsherds, and generally living a very inferior imaginative life.

Yet a number of scholars in the field of archaeology would never have entered that world of Dirt, with its stones and heat and hard living and hard prickly social life only cooled by beer and swimming, unless we had been fired, when younger, by the pleasures of the Word and its gripping images of the past. No one would willingly, or knowingly spend the summers of a life away from home, among people whose politics we do not understand, whose languages we do not speak well, whose economics we affect only marginally, whose social community is usually closed to us except for a few extroverted and internationally minded people, unless we had a deep abiding love for the Classics and cared with some kind of passion to see still hidden classical remains at first hand.

This means entering the worlds of strangers, imposing our requests upon them, opening holes in their fields, keeping them working during hot summer noons, deducing from shades in their Dirt what local history had unrolled here, taking notes and photographs that may make the people suspicious, trying to master their language and local vocabulary, trying not to offend unwittingly. I remember the workers in Cyprus believing we were trying to show our mound was the first home of the American Indian so that the U.S. could take over the local airbases; there are some ideas one is scarcely prepared for.

Most of us who have excavated have loved the people who helped us do it, and recognized from the beginning that we were inadequate to understand their thoughts on the work, or what they were imagining about what was happening inside the Dirt. And these inadequacies may make us offensive against our intentions. I remember as yesterday what happened to me the first day I was invited to come to the Agora in Athens, where I was a student in 1950, to look after some situation I did not understand, a hole full of bones and

some ash under something I was told was the Temple of Ares, although I had not even seen a plan of the Agora at that time.

Lunch time came, the sun was high, and I walked over to the old buildings which were then the headquarters of the Agora, before they were taken down for the sake of the antiquity underneath them. As I passed a group of workmen, I heard them say what I thought was "Come on, do it, quick." I looked, and the workmen had captured a toad, and had put a cigarette with the burning end down his throat, pushing his rib cage to force him to breathe. I did not have the words in Greek to express what I felt; I yelled at them in English, "You bastards, stop that," and they had been around town enough to recognize both the insult of the message and the inferiority of the messenger.

Homer Thompson administered me a tremendous rebuke when the men complained: "This is not your country, this is not your language, this is not your culture; please respect them, whatever they do." I still do not know whose ignorance was worse, mine or the workmen's, and although I still think I did the less harm, I agree fully with Mr. Thompson's assessment, that some one young and inexperienced who intrudes though ignorance and lack of reflection is apt to do cultural damage.

It is easy for archaeologists to make this kind of social mistake, and probably they do it more frequently than philologists, who are protected by their liberal sophistication. And perhaps by their more international community of interests. Archaeologists are almost by necessity local in spirit. I do not mean like the hero of old, whose cult was local and who had power from his place in the earth; it is more pragmatic. Once we become at one with a site we can seldom travel away from it to see what colleagues on other sites are achieving. That is why meetings like this one are so crucial to field archaeologists in particular, so they can begin to learn how dozens of individual sites can intersect and link up through trade and exchanges.

It is not easy to become a good archaeologist. It has never been easy to become a good philologist either; hours and years of work, exploring grammar and lexika, and what words really mean as opposed to what the dictionary declares they mean. From schooldays we took pride in giving an interesting translation of a difficult passage, hoping not only to earn the respect of teachers but to develop some verbal skill, which was hard to attain. Philologists are often poets when they are young; later the talent seems to wither, but the initial impulse to develop rhythmic sequences, well-sounding words, and a big lasting message in small compass is quite universal.

For the archaeologist the experience is a little different. It is hard to read a text in the Dirt. There are no lexika, no grammars; everyday you look at something that has not been seen before in modern times, and try to interpret it. The skill of three-dimensional mental reconstruction of buildings underfoot before the earth is broken is innate in only a few, I think; I have seen it for stone in Charles Williams and Joseph Shaw, for mudbrick in Machteld Mellink, perhaps on the sea floor in George Bass, and such people have an easier time reading the text in the Dirt than the rest of us.

Perhaps the text to be read is a new site that no one has tried to read before. Perhaps it is an old site for which the original excavator has left no coherent notes or samples. Whether it is Troy, destroyed by ignorance and impetuosity, or Megiddo, troubled by the Bible, the angle of entrance and the record keeping, or Mycenae spoiled by a naif expectation of Homer and greed for publicity, there has been a lot of trouble on our earth made by archaeologists who had no traditional guidance.

One of the troubles is to reconcile what the ancients told us about any town or site, and what we actually find there. Here is where the conflict between the Dirt and the Word gets quite interesting. I am talking really about Greek places here, which I know somewhat better than the Italian ones—please forgive me for this necessary parochialism. Our impressions of what ancient places were like are formed partly by poets, partly by historians. The Homeric Catalogue of Ships is perhaps the most convincing early representative of the poetic school of description; so towns are grassy, or steep, or windy, or filled with doves, or sheep, nothing of much practical use since these epithets could apply to most of Greece.

Although the Greeks became good at the geometry they said they learned from the Egyptians, and wonderful at the architecture based on geometry, they were not so skilled at descriptive space. With few exceptions the geometers and the poets did not band together, and even the historians describing battles in the fields or fights within the town are not often able to sketch the setting for us convincingly; that is why there is a battle literature of modern times, in order to clarify the ancients. This visual literary impairment has a good cause, Greek love for the poetic, formulaic, epic tradition, the reason, I think, for Alexander the Great's failure to take artists with him to the east, for his personal epic was not really meant to record the ways of foreigners, but to be sung in pure antique Greek, Homerically only.

May I take a moment to look with you at Thebes, a town I am interested in although I have not been back for thirty years? Shrouded under a modern high-rise city is the legendary setting for so much splendid Attic tragedy. Granted those tragedies were created by Athenian enemies of Thebes, so that we should not be surprised at the poetic shedding on to Thebes of Athens' own poor fears and traits, the allegations of murder, incest, incestuous quarreling children—disputing to control ancestral wealth and lands. But what do we know about the town of Thebes from the writers who focused there?

Somewhere there is—on stage at least—a palace, there are formidable walls, there are seven gates, there is the acropolis, the Kadmeion of the founder Kadmos, there are gold cups being hurled at people's heads, and haunches of meat, funeral games and ambushes, a set of springs and hero shrines and cult places, there are various people falling off walls to their death to protect their town's future, there are various parties setting off with torches to worship Dionysos on the slopes of Kithairon, not far are the Muses on Helikon, and somewhere there is Hesiod's sad village of Askra; there is the great lake, scarcely mentioned, there are the fields, scarcely mentioned. Who was it in the Theban management team who bought the bones of Hektor from Troy? To reinforce the linkage of the two great competing epics, the *Iliad* and the *Thebaid*, one of which was lost before the Middle Ages? Nothing here but can fail to excite a practioner of the Word; nothing here that can really help a practitioner of the Dirt.

There are normally several parts to what happens next. Thebes again is in stark contrast to Athens, where, in the well-known boast, every object from the Agora could be dropped back into its original space if necessary. At Thebes, as the town went high-rise, the objects were generally flung high in the air, the pile drivers and bulldozers showering the skies with fragments of cuirass, of the first best chariot in Greece, with fresco scraps and bits of Linear B tablets.

(Linear B is pehaps a field where the Dirt and the Word come together most completely. These scraps of clay concealed in mud, so easy to discard by accident, have brought us so much illumination for the early culture and language of Greece, we can only maintain an enduring thanks to scholars of the stature of Emmett Bennett, Mabel Lang, Michael Ventris, whose own work and whose students' work, and the work of the students of those students, have educated us in a new and startling way.)

The archaeologists tried to discover where all these things came from, but the context was gone. Then in corners unwanted for building the workers of the

Archaeological Service scraped away, establishing strata and chronology, cleared some corners of workshops, and could eventually say with public confidence "This is the palace of Kadmos, this is the palace of Laios," and only worried in private at night why the pottery from the two should look so much alike.

Such scenarios develop because the writer, the recreator of the measured and plausible fiction that is an excavation report, has permitted archaeology to serve as ancilla only, as an illustration to someone else's text, a text developed by fifth century authors from Athens for Thebes, the expected text. This used to happen of course all the time in the nineteenth century, when the monuments of the Holy Land served only to illustrate grand biblical texts or a scholar set out perhaps to follow the footsteps of Saint Paul, a difficult saint to follow in any sense. Auden had an insight in his little song "Archaeology":[2]

> From Archaeology
> one moral at least may be drawn,
> to wit, that all
>
> our school text-books lie.
> What they call History
> is nothing to vaunt of,
>
> being made as it is
> by the criminal in us:
> goodness is timeless.

And I feel sure that, for Thebes or any other famous literary site, one must respect one's profession enough, and the forms inside the Dirt enough, to refuse to make them conform to the themes of Attic tragedy composed seven hundred years later, in another time, another place, for another purpose.

But how to set oneself up in competition with the far superior minds and imaginations of the fifth century? With Aeschylus and Sophokles? Who would dare make the competing song that would create a different Thebes, a Bronze Age Thebes as it really was? The Thebaid epic is lost; we cannot become one in the chain of its singers. This is where we need help. We cannot reconstruct history out of the Dirt without some command of the Word, and I want to stress

[2]W. H. Auden, *Collected Poems* (New York 1976) 662.

this. In recent generations we have offered our reconstructions in less compelling language than earlier scholars used. Who could now reproduce Miss Goldman's *Eutresis*?[3] We have more data now, more technological skills, more machines; I fear we often have lesser verbal skills.

We have perhaps a less aesthetic purpose. We have learned to feel afraid of subjectivity and instinct. Many of us have felt we should look more scientific the more we quantified, the very notion that drove so many of us into the systems processes and mathematical formulas of the New Archaeology of the New World. But will quantification really create the plausible fiction, the well-made story that is the goal of archaeologists, the only way we can convert the shapes and measurements inside the Dirt, which are now gone because we dug them out, into new public life in the Word, which should replace the original in a memorable way?

No one wants to scrape dirt without a purpose, and the purpose is normally persuasive reconstruction. From this point of view a definition of archaeology I like is gardening upside down, to keep the stones as you go deeper and throw away the Dirt after extensive notes and photographs. The purpose of gardening is to please the eye, the mind, even the spirit, to create a place that induces both work and reflection. An archaeological report, like a garden, is a fiction, not as Nature left it; it is a replacement geometry, measured facts told in words with reasonable interpretations. And this, I think, is why so many archaeologists read detective stories, to bolster by night their fainting hopes of recreating plausible fiction by day.

When numbers dominate the Word, this same false hope of becoming respectable through quantification has infected a number of classical excavation reports to their disadvantage. Believe me, friends, absolutely no one who reads cares deeply to discover items like "30 centimeters to the northwest of the wall in Area A we discovered at a depth of 2.21 meters parts of a crushed pithos." If your living depended on remembering tens of thousands of such remarks, you would rather be in eternity, or I would.

Do you really want to spend your one precious life, your limited eye and brain capacity, your imaginative and creative powers, reading—in a very

[3]Hetty Goldman, *Excavations at Eutresis in Boeotia, conducted by the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University in cooperation with the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, Greece* (Cambridge, Mass. 1931).

respectable publication, too—"In the eastern part of grid square NLc, excavation was continued beneath Floor Four, the earliest floor of the West Shrine. As reported above, a Late Bronze I wall, Wall 607, was found running very approximately to (but not aligned with) the north wall of the West Shrine, Wall 603." These horrors represent raw field notes, not prose of any power to reconstruct.

The archaeologist's duty requires him to replace his lost landscapes with words to convince others of the reality of what had been there. This is quite different from the wonderful, imaginative literary landscapes of the philologist, which are not factual but inventive. The words for the Dirt must say, these stones were here, those walls were burned, the people left, and if possible they must recreate true lives once spent in this environment. And they must acquire the necessary power.

So in these endeavors to find things in the Dirt and illuminate and ultimately replace them with the Word, we require your help and hope for it. I know there are too few hours in the days to read all we need to read for what we teach, but perhaps a little effort and genuine collegiality could help us read more of one another's work than we now think is efficient. The classical philologist needs to understand that the archaeologist is trying his best to replace lost Dirt with good new Words, and sympathize; the archaeologist needs to understand that the philologist is also fired by images and shapes and measures and geometries, and respect his passions.

This is Pindar's κοιναὶ γὰρ ἔρχοντ' ἐλπίδες / πολυπόνων ἀνδρῶν (*Nem.* 1.32), hard to translate like so much of this favorite poet: "hopes walk in common of men who have taken great trouble"; better, the Lattimore version, "the hopes of men that labor long have some community." And our hopes, and our labors, have all been focused on those tremendous stretches of ancient culture across the whole spectrum from language to economy to astronomy to religion to art to history which seem special to the people in this room because they so appeal to our receptive and creative imaginations. The tremendous geographical span of it, from Asia Minor to Spain; the tremendous time span of it, from Palaeolithic to Late Antique—antiquity is extremely impressive and always will be. Within this gorgeous spacious structure are many mansions, in the mansions a particular private room for each one of us; and we might as well be neighborly about it, even friends.