

People Behind Practice: Theoretical Archaeologies of the Near East
March 31st – April 2nd 2009
Ghent University, Belgium

Introduction

In recent decades, Near Eastern archaeology has witnessed a tremendous increase in more theoretically informed publications and workshops. Theorizing the remote past has substantially enhanced our knowledge of why particular phenomena and practices might have been adopted or rejected in certain places at certain times. It has brought us new insight into the pasts that we study and has forced us to look more closely at ourselves as practitioners of academic research and therefore re-creators of these pasts.

The present conference wishes to push current trends in theoretical archaeology forward by turning its attention to the people, both past and present, that exist behind the excavation, the sherd, the soil-trace or the article. It approaches these 'people behind practice' through two main conference themes, which deal respectively with the role of 'non-archaeological' factors in the creation of archaeological knowledge, and with the question of how to approach overlooked or over-studied parts of the archaeological record or study those facets of the past that ostensibly don't leave visible traces.

Geography and chronology

The geographical scope of the conference ranges from the Eastern Mediterranean to Iran and from the Black Sea to the North to the Arabian Peninsula to the South.

The chronological scope ranges from the Neolithic through to the advent of Islam.

Conference Themes

A. The Taphonomy of Knowledge

Much like the material remains which lie at its heart, archaeological knowledge itself is created and recreated by human hand and mind. It is born in ideological spaces, it may be maintained for decades or pushed into academic oblivion, it can be altered through re-interpretation or salvaged after periods of neglect. Under this first conference-theme the organisers aim to group papers dealing with the internal and external factors that influence how archaeological knowledge is created, passed down to subsequent generations of researchers or pushed out of view. This broad theme has been divided into two sub-topics:

- Excavating archaeology: here we focus on case-studies in which old sites, material collections or individual excavations have recently been the subject of re-interpretation. Papers should deal with questions such as how zeitgeists, politics, religious ideology etc. influenced the original excavation and interpretation and how new socio-cultural or academic frameworks might alter our understanding of this material and influence our view of the past.

- Academic taphonomy: as academics, archaeologists move through a world of material archives, excavation notes and secondary literature. How we perceive of ourselves and of the past, and how we conduct research, is directly influenced by our access to this world. Papers presented under this sub-topic should explore the impact of academic factors such as: archival classification; publication and citation strategies; barriers of nationality and language; terminologies, copying and repetition; accessibility of material and literature; and *a-priori* qualitative assessment of material, text or theory. The theme also presents itself as a call for good practice: since we cannot but fall back on or interact with the wealth of material produced by predecessor and contemporary, it is important to assess how we can best approach this material.

B. The Archaeology of the Invisible

Theoretical archaeology has created a broad range of new ways of perceiving the remote past. However, it has also at times created an even greater distance between us archaeologists and the people we study, by the advocacy of a 'thoughts first, things next' approach. Without going back to obsolete typo-chronologies, papers collected under this second theme focus on how as archaeologists we might visualize the past in a more down-to-earth, direct way – that is, by focussing first on evidence that may or may not be at hand, and then assessing this in the light of established or recently challenged theories. We encourage papers that either deal with material that has largely been neglected in the theoretical discourse – and thus became invisible – or papers that deal with material that has too often been (ab)used 'to make a point' in the (recent) past, blinding us from other potential understandings of the past.

We also argue for an archaeology of 'daily practice', bringing more neglected segments and members of communities and societies alive by reconstructing past ways of life and life stadia through either 'peculiar' or on the contrary overtly 'common' material. Issues related to expressions and alterations in identity construction, visible in the material record on the individual and on the communal level, are particularly welcomed, as are papers that deal with identification of gender, age, power, elitism, commensalism etc. We call for papers that by addressing these issues bring the 'people behind practice' to life.

Abstract deadline

Please e-mail your abstract of max. 200 words to either Aurelie Daems or Bart Ooghe (Aurelie.Daems@Ugent.be, Bart.Ooghe@Ugent.be), with indication of your name, affiliation, contact address and the main theme under which you wish to present the paper. Papers should not exceed 20-25 minutes, as each speaker will be allotted 30 minutes for presentation and questions. A more lengthy plenary discussion may be possible at the end of each session.

The abstract deadline has been set at **September 30th, 2008**.

Location and Registration

The conference will take place in the historical buildings of 'Het Pand' at Ghent University (Belgium), from March 31st to April 2nd 2009. Further information for registration to follow.