

## MUSEUMS AND ARCHAEOLOGY - A VIEW FROM THE ARCHAEOLOGIST

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The present article is not trying to offer answers on what the representation of archaeology in museums should be. It merely attempts to pinpoint some of the main issues that occur when trying to exhibit archaeological artefacts and moreover, some of the frustrations that both the archaeologist and the public encounter when visiting such an exhibition. The roots of the problem originate in the different perception of the two 'participants' mentioned above: the archaeologist and the public, over issues such as the importance of the artefacts, the accuracy of the 'story' behind them, the goal/purpose of archaeology as a science and the goal/purpose of museums. Therefore, we should perhaps start with the very beginning:

### What is Archaeology?

*'Archaeology is about Facts; if you want the Truth go next door to the Philosophy Department!'* - Professor Indiana Jones (dialogue from the film "Indiana Jones")

Most archaeologists spend their whole life gathering items that most people would regard as insignificant and even ugly: small bits of stone, potsherds of the tiniest sizes, bone fragments... This would not hold the eye of museum-goers for more than a few seconds and even then it would be in dismay, not in awe. But for the excavator itself this is the very backbone of the life he/she has chosen. It is from here that the inferring of the past starts. Questions as: what does it all mean, what can I tell about the past starting from these things and why it happened what it happened, are first to occur. Then come the tougher ones: what is the point of investigating the past, what can I tell about the people who

made these things, does the past have any relevance for the present? What does the past mean?<sup>1</sup>

It is this last question that marks the deepest break between the archaeologist and the non-archaeologist. For most people, the image of the former is materialized by Lara Croft, Indiana Jones, Sidney Fox or the Librarian, that is, a relic hunter in exotic locations. Few non-archaeologists realize that archaeology actually starts where the adventure ends – with the interpretation of the material, the debates about the meaning of the artefacts, the intricate analyses in the labs. *Experience has taught most archaeologists that the non-archaeologist has little patience for the convoluted intricate analyses archaeologists go through when arguing with each other about what the past means. Most non-archaeologists, unsurprisingly, would be more interested, for example, viewing the gold masks that Schliemann found at Troy than listening to professional archaeologists debate the inferred socio-economic and political organizations of the first millennium B.C. town at Tepe-Hissarlik, where these masks were found*<sup>2</sup>.

Still, there must be a bridge between what the archaeologists do and what the public wants to see. There must be a way of showing to the non-archaeologists that understanding the factors that determined the course of human histories and the nature of cultures, and explaining why certain patterns appeared, can be as interesting and provoking as hunting after real treasures. The key to this is to present to people not only the results of an archaeological excavation but the basic, simplified "rules and laws" of archaeology. Giving the people the tools

1. Robert J. Wenke, *Patterns in prehistory. Humankind's first three million years*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999, p.2-3

2. Idem, p.3

3. Brian Fagan, *Archaeology: a brief introduction*, Ninth Edition, Pearson Prentice Hall, 2006, p.205. Fig. 9.2.

will help them understand and appreciate better the whole amount of work behind the archaeological research.

What people find most difficult to apprehend is how did those artefacts end up buried into the ground. So, within a public exhibition, a few facts about site formation processes – not a complicated text but a suggestive drawing – would solve this problem<sup>3</sup>. Other questions I have often been addressed are – why only certain types of artefacts are found and others not, how can we tell it really happened the way we said it did, how do we know how old those things were. So, parts of the permanent exhibitions (or perhaps separate temporary exhibitions) should attempt to focus on these questions the public is interested in, with basic information on soil preservation, analogies in ethnography, facts about experimental archaeology<sup>4</sup> and dating methods.

One of the best things about permanent exhibitions is that they stay there so nobody has to absorb all information at once and actually it is in the interest of the museum that people find things challenging and educative and keep coming again and again... And this leads us to the second main issue of the present paper:

What is a museum<sup>5</sup> and what purpose should it serve? Is it a keeper of absolute knowledge, a collection of collections? What should the level of the presented information be: academic or mass-accessible?

*The museum is a public cultural institution serving the society, who collects, preserves, researches, restores, communicates and exhibits, with the goal of acquiring knowledge, educating and re-creating the material and*

*spiritual proofs of the existence and evolution of human communities and the environment*<sup>6</sup> – is what the law has decreed.

But there is more behind it than a simple definition – collecting and exposing does not simply trigger education – the museum needs to reach its public and it is only this way that the goal of museum is fully accomplished<sup>7</sup>. And it is here that most museums with archaeological exhibition are at fault.

In Romania, prior to 1989, the main exhibition in a *history*<sup>8</sup> museum was a chain of historical events of national coverage, sometimes with a light stress on local archaeological discoveries. All permanent exhibitions started with the Palaeolithic, then humans evolved, went through the Neolithic, Bronze Age, Iron Age, etc., and reached modern times. It was the general ladder of evolution, seen through a series of displayed artefacts, from stone, pot to metal items. It was a poor version of what Vasile Pârvan had dreamt of in 1921<sup>9</sup>.

Pârvan wanted the organization of a single national museum with various departments for the various historical/archaeological ages, the establishment of an Institute of Archaeology, an ethnographical museum, a museum of industrial art and several regional mixed museums. At that point in time archaeological research meant only uncovering more and more archaeological sites and creating a national catalogue, discovering more archaeological cultures, writing huge syntheses on well established and delimited archaeological ages. The ‘popularization’ (public relations today...) of the discoveries was also recognized an important role.

4 The National Museum of History in Budapest has produced a very good documentary in experimental stone tool producing that runs in the prehistory department every half an hour...

5. Although some of the statements are general, the author refers mainly to archaeological/history museums.

6 The Law of museums and public collections, I. Oberlander, “Acreditarea muzeelor”, *Revista Muzeelor*, 2, 2005, p.98

7. A. Zbuchea, “O viziune de marketing privind expozițiile muzeale”,

*Revista Muzeelor*, 1, 2005, p.81.

8. We shall come back to this further down this article.

But what was an important beginning a hundred years ago can no longer be enough today and unfortunately, most archaeology exhibitions are exactly the same as 50 years when they were first set up but, of course, a lot dustier. New discoveries are rarely incorporated, mainly because of the inflexible structure of the exhibitions and the fixed spaces allocated within the museum halls.

Museums, as people, should change as time goes. Their exhibitions need constant change and adaptation to the new theories and methods currently employed in archaeology. It is only normal that people are no longer thrilled to look at the same collection of dusty old pots in the windows... And unfortunately this is exactly what most Romanian museums have to offer... It is a fact that the temporary exhibitions attract by far a larger number of visitors, as they are fresher and more up-to-date.

So one of the main issues when re-organizing a permanent archaeological exhibition today is whether a theme oriented presentation and interpretation of facts should be thought of, or should we be content with the good (?) old fashioned mere chronology of artefacts?

But what is really an artefact? As archaeology is more than the simple excavation of items so the public should be able see the people and their behaviour behind the things in display. **Archaeology is not a discipline about buried stuff, it is about the life and behaviour of people in times long gone.** We are not digging just to bring to light more and more prehistoric or later objects but to learn what humans and their life was in those times. This should

be one of the first things the public should also learn about archaeology when entering a museum.

Secondly, the ideas and theories of the archaeologists should be transparent to the public and therefore a theory / explanation covering the basic facts should be presented, in a simplified form. There should also be made clear that sometimes there are multiple theories that fit the archaeological evidence. As Professor Indian Jones put it, archaeology can only present hypothesis but we shall never be sure about the truth.

The good part is that the public will be able to judge for themselves, choose the most convincing story to them, thus making the archaeological reasoning attractive and stimulating, contributing to their education and enlarging their knowledge.

I can think of at least one good example of how things should be presented different to the audience, more entertaining and closer to what the archaeological records revealed, than what museums have in store today on the subject of the neolithisation<sup>10</sup>.

What we see in most museums is labels – Stone Age and a chronology next to ‘Neolithic’ and a chronology. In Stone Age we see of course only stone tools (no hints usually on how those little pieces of rock could have been used by prehistoric people), in Neolithic we see mostly pottery everywhere. One can get the idea that people went to bed into the Stone Age and the next morning the Neolithic had come over them.... We also infer that the Stone Age people lived miserable lives, full of hardships and little food, spending their whole day hunting and pecking berries, while

9. V. Pârvan, *Problems of Romanian Archaeology: Art and Archaeology*, London, 1926, V. Boroneanț, *Vasile Pârvan fondator al școlii românești de arheologie*, Carpica, 1972, p.7-11

10. I have chosen this example as it is one I am most familiar with.

during the Neolithic all went rosé... crops to harvest, plenty of food, animals to help people with their work, in one word, evolution!!!

But how did it really happen? What did trigger this change to the domestication of animals, cultivation of plants and yes, use of pottery? How come it happened almost simultaneously in different parts of the world? Were the 'Neolithic' people really living better and healthier lives than the hunter-gatherers? Is evolution that simple? Archaeological evidence show nowadays that the change wasn't that fast and definitely did not bring only joy...

So, the public should be presented the main theories that might have triggered the origins of agriculture: demographic pressure, climate change, social stress, etc., given the arguments and encouraged to take sides for one or the other of the hypothesis. This can also be done more attractively through pictures and diagrams, not only through text.

More insights into people's everyday activities, diet, health would make the visitors understand that new discoveries bring new problems: eating cereals means sugar and sugar means caries, sedentism means agglomerations of people and this leads to easier spread of diseases, etc. Making stone tools is hard but making pottery is even harder...

Helping people understand all these makes archaeology really a mystery solver as portrayed in the adventure movies, and also a discipline providing answers to valid scientific questions in the same time. And the public would see that there is more to archaeology than digging and smuggling treasures from tombs and caves...

Presenting things this way takes us to a third main issue: the way archaeologists see themselves and the nature of their work, their links to the museum curators. So, naturally, the next question would be: **who organizes/should organize the archaeological exhibitions?**

It is not unusual anywhere in the world for museum-curators to participate in archaeological digs, but the Romanian case is a particularly sad one: archaeology is not a profession but a 'title' or a 'qualification'. We all are researchers, museum curators, history teachers or professors and yet we can all be archaeologists – and that in the same time!!! Apart from the serious implications for the archaeology as a discipline, this has also secondary effects, one of them being the way archaeology is presented to the public in museums.

Being a museum-curator is neither better nor worse than being an archaeologist, it is something else. A museum curator is the 'interface' between the archaeological mind and the public. It is the one who filters the material, ideas and theories and moulds them in a finite product – one that appeals and makes sense to the public eye – the exhibition. This 'filter' helps to present the archaeological material simplified and yet at different levels of perception, it makes it attractive and stimulating – and that is an art! But it is also a time consuming activity.

Both archaeologists and museum curators should provide their expertise in putting together exhibitions. If the archaeologist is the excavator and the planner the exhibitions more than once tend to be biased towards a certain hypothesis presented the as the absolute

11. Michael Belcher, *Exhibitions in Museums*, Leicester Univ. Press, Leicester, 1991, p.78

truth. Organizing an exhibition is a team work, where quite a number of people get involved: the director of the museum, the curator, the archaeologist, the designer of the exhibition, the conservator, etc.<sup>11</sup> a more objective perspective will be gained upon facts and this is of major importance. Museum exhibitions should be objective!

Furthermore, scientific disciplines do not stand by themselves. They intertwine and support each other. Traditionally, in Europe and hence, Romania, archaeology was seen as an auxiliary of history. So, archaeological exhibitions naturally existed in history museums and basically one can never tell when we pass from archaeology to history.... Of course it seems more natural to associate the two, but other disciplines could also use the support and information archaeology has to offer.

Recently, the "Grigore Antipa" National Museum of Natural History in Bucharest organized an interesting exhibition 'A zoologist among ruins'. It was a successful attempt to bring archaeology into the world of natural history, recreating the ancient life and habitat of the Greek city of Histria.

Apart from presenting people a series of first time exhibited artefacts discovered at Histria, it also talked about the natural environment in the Danube Delta, the diet of ancient people and the food habits in Greek antiquity, it showed the everyday life of people through the recreation of a typical archaic house. Helping with the educational process was the bi-lingual catalogue of the exhibition and a CD. Why can't we have more of these multi-disciplinary temporary exhibitions, instead of a

never-ending succession of restored pots with labels saying 'Neolithic / Bronze age pottery'?

And talking about archaeology and museums, there is much more that can be done parallel to the exhibitions themselves. Contrary to our tradition prior to WWII, nowadays there are no public conferences on archaeological subjects that could arouse public interest, there are very few documentary films locally made (we are not discussing National Geographic...), no museums have educative programs on archaeological themes<sup>12</sup> or computer learning programs<sup>13</sup>. Children, who could be easily attracted to archaeology, are not a main targeted public. Growing an educated public would only lead to a diversity of new exhibitions (perhaps some of them 'imported') and thus contribute to the quality of the museum services. Also, apart from the growing prestige would also improve the financial aspects<sup>14</sup>, because, as we well know, everybody needs money, museums included.

#### Final remarks

As a non-museum worker I have little experience with organizing exhibitions in real life. But the practical would never stand up by itself without the back-up of the theory. Things like: why do we need this particular exhibition, how would the archaeological material be selected and displayed (and do we have the financial means to do it well?), what is the targeted public, what message do we want the public to get, all are important questions and without having straight answers to them an archaeological exhibition could never reach its goal and it would fail and be pointless.

12. see the programs of the National Archaeological Museums of Athens at [www.culture.gr](http://www.culture.gr)

13. see *Windows to the Past* developed in 1997 by the Museum of Alexandria, Virginia, USA at [www.oha.ci.alexandria.va.us/archaeology](http://www.oha.ci.alexandria.va.us/archaeology)  
14. A. Zbucnea, op.cit. p.81