

# **A critical review of Renfrew and Bahn's "Archaeology - theory, methods and practice"**

The book object of this review actually is considered the most complete and updated introduction to archaeology. In only one text, the entire discipline is presented in a clear exposition especially suitable for first year students in archaeology. The value of this book as textbook is certainly high, and the background experience of the authors can only ensure a good quality of information and its overall correctness. It is a precious reference manual, where everyone, not only first year students [\[1\]](#), can find a lot of interesting things about the new ways of doing archaeology in these years. It is divided in three main sections, as is clear from the title, but in each one there are many little articles and pictures that try to link the ideas expressed to as many as possible real excavations. In this way it present also the various branches of the discipline. In the last years, it is the only attempt to concentrate archaeology in one book, so it is not too extraordinary the success it has: now there is the third edition in bookshops. In Italy, for example, before the publication of a translation, now widely used, the only reference a student had, was an encyclopaedia formed by many books, with few pictures and a lot of academic definitions without many links to exemplificative excavations. In the U.S.A., where there is instead a tradition of quick manuals rather than encyclopaedias like in Europe, it became "the" manual of archaeology, a concentrate of archaeology useful to understand the discipline in a small amount of time, and moreover to define its boundaries.

The question that arises at this point is simple: is this book really a *summa* of archaeology, a comprehensive encyclopaedia of archaeology, the Bible of the modern archaeologist? I personally think that if it is a good introduction for the novice, on the other hand only Indiana Jones could use it as a manual where to find the answer to any question archaeology pose! Having read the book is not sufficient to be considered an archaeologist. One of its limits is that it presents archaeology as it is seen by academic archaeologists [\[2\]](#), not by every archaeologist. It is used as an introduction to archaeology in the universities and pushed by the colleagues of the authors, it is hardly found in other contexts. The current consensus of the book is therefore justified by this fact. For

example the section "Archaeology in Action", presents four excavations done as all excavations should be done according to the archaeological theory: some archaeologists formulated an hypothesis, they began an excavation to verify it and then they produced later an inference. This is good to show how theory can be applied, but it is not how archaeology is usually done. The majority of excavations are rescue operations, done by professional archaeologists, not academic ones; furthermore there are many projects done by amateur archaeologists, and sometimes there are lucky discoveries done by people who have not any experience or knowledge of archaeology. In this way the archaeology in action described is that of a few archaeologists who study the discipline in the books and work to elaborate new theories. There is no example, no description of an excavation done quickly because other people wait to build in that area; or unfinished because there is no more money; or done by non professionals (that have instead the necessary money); or unpublished because the inference is not an immediate thing, before it is necessary to know all the material, also the material excavated in a previous occasion by other archaeologists, and this is really far to be easy. The way of doing archaeology presented is therefore far at the same time both by the archaeology really done in practice and by the discipline imagined by common people. It seems a "cold" procedure without any trouble, organised and thought by the archaeologist already before the excavation, that become only a way to verify theories and test hypothesis.

Archaeology is a discipline difficult to define, because it presents various different aspects, such as the theoretical, practical and "external [3]" ones. These are not well exposed in the book, or sometimes simply ignored, as they would have no role in the discipline. But really the force that led Schliemann to discover Troy, his love for antiquity, is out of archaeology? Archaeology is also the excavation done by non professionals, just because they want to know more of the past, of the history of humanity, even if limited to a particular area, that is the same reason at the end professional archaeologists have, or should have, in a wider scale.

The book published before this, that was considered "the" introduction to archaeology, probably is Ceram`s *"Gods, Graves and Scholars"*, now quite old. It is interesting to evaluate the difference between these books, especially about which arguments are felt as determinant to describe the discipline, to understand in which direction are going the studies of archaeology and what we are losing and/or acquiring. The vision of archaeology given by Ceram is for the most part influenced by romantic ideas, where the scholar is the centre of action, the hero that discovers the past.

However archaeology is explicated narrating many real excavations, chosen for the importance of data found; the reader in this way participate to the excavation knowing that at the beginning there is no precise ideas on what archaeologists will found, only the hope to find something interesting. The theory is almost inexistent, the methods are "primitive" but the practice is real, at least for those times [4]. Renfrew and Bahn instead are able to make understandable different theories, very important to comprehend what archaeology should look for; also the series of methods presented are virtually complete and updated, with the necessary space given to the new scientific approaches and analysis of material evidence; but the practice is far from the reality. The archaeologist described in the book is not emotively involved in what is doing, it seems that s/he knows already what he will find, there is no stress or anxiety thinking that the time for the excavation is limited while the evidence is complex, particularly remarkable and/or surprisingly abundant. Archaeologists are those who theories the discipline and use the opportune methods to find the evidence they need for their theories, while who spent the own life saving artefacts, evidence, data, or who provides the necessary care to the materials and the sites, is treated like a technician, or an amateur. The authors acknowledge the importance of these persons, but at the same time put them kindly out of the golden door of that science called archaeology. Archaeology is become in this view a science as many others, without any particularity, where there is no space for emotions or surprises.

While we have done giant's steps in elaborating a necessary theory and refining the methods, making of archaeology also a recognised science, we are losing a precious and distinctive characteristic of archaeology: the unpredictability of material evidence found in the excavations. Also materials are losing their centrality in favour of the more abstract theory: the best thing would be a centrality of materials and inference. This last should be intended as wide explanation of the materials themselves and of the context in which existed. It is produced studying the evidence and having in mind the theories. Young people, who want to do archaeology, will have unreal ideas of what an archaeologist does in practice, and they will discover this soon, at the time they will participate to any excavation outside an academic project, that is the most common case.

The only criticism I can do to this highly valuable book, that well represents the actual tendencies of archaeology, is therefore for the third part: the practice. As the same authors recognise, it is not a secondary part of the discipline, but one of its main components. Trying to demonstrate that some modern icons of archaeology

taken especially by the world of cinema are not well illustrative of the modern archaeology and of the work an archaeologist does, it seems that the authors forget completely how these myths are born, which elements in the real archaeology produced the ideas behind these characters. Materials are also the most direct medium we have to the past, and often they are a value too. For these reasons I do not think that archaeology has to lose its peculiarities and uniform itself to other, more conventional, disciplines: even in the theory, archaeology is an uncommon field, crossed with anthropology, history, and sciences in different ways. This is because the subject of archaeology is, at the end, the humanity: do you know a more complex subject?

[1] Every archaeologist, at any stage of his/her career, could find useful to read a little description of some of the new techniques used in archaeology. An archaeologist generally is specialised in a particular sector of the discipline, in which has experience and no need to use this book. However sometimes a new discovery, or just the necessity of understand some data obtained in a way not used in his sector, constrain the archaeologist to look for a definition.

[2] Like the authors.

[3] Here I mean the archaeology as it is seen by those that do archaeology for hobby, without being directly involved in all the aspects of discipline, and often without having a good knowledge of the discipline itself.

[4] The rescue excavations, normally in our days, were a rarity at the beginning of the century.

© **Andrea Vianello – Sheffield, 1999**

<http://www.bronzeage.org.uk/>