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A few thoughts inspired by a book

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In 2007, Left Coast Press (Walnut Creek, California) published a book signed by Barbara Bender, Sue Hamilton and Chris Tilley, entitled *Stone worlds: narrative and reflexivity in landscape archaeology* (fig. 1). The book refers to the multidisciplinary researches carried out between 1995 and 1999 on the prehistoric, but also contemporary landscape at Leskernick, a small hill in Bodmin Moor, Cornwall, south-western of United Kingdom. The oldest monument at Leskernick seems to be a large propped stone located on the hilltop, which was probably built in the Neolithic or even Mesolithic. Chronologically, the Propped Stone is succeeded by a series of small cairns, of which one contains a cist, most of them placed near the foot of the hill and one on the hill, and which could presumably be included in a time period that ranges from Neolithic to Early Bronze Age. Another cairn, but of a large size, was built in the Early Bronze Age on the top of the hill. Later on, in Early/Middle Bronze Age, possibly before the inhabitation of the hill, a stone row and two stone circles were built below the hill. In the Middle Bronze Age, on the southern and western sides of the hill two settlements separated by a corridor that leads to the top of the hill appeared; the settlements were associated with enclosures and compounds, and were formed of 50 round houses. Research had been carried out both on the Leskernick Hill and in the surrounding area, on the moor. Among other things, the project included excavations, surface surveys and geological surveys.

What captured our attention is not the data offered on the prehistoric sites and landscapes, but the spirit that animated the initiators of the project and in which, consequently, the book was written. We do not deal with a conventional monograph, with a linear narrative structure, abundant in descriptions of features and materials out of which the conclusions allegedly arise “naturally”, but with a volume in which the authors, who are also the project directors, wanted to emphasise the manner in which knowledge is produced. Thus, the working conditions, the working atmosphere, the methodologies used, the differences of opinion concerning the organization, excavation and recording manner, the way the decisions are taken, commented upon or contested, the way interpretations are built, abandoned or transformed (from the identification of a feature to the publication), but also the feelings of those involved about the landscape they work in – all are mentioned in the pages of the book. From the beginning the intention was to create an atmosphere as democratic and reflexive as possible, free of hierarchies, in which all the participants can express their mind freely. Moreover, to objectify their approach, the authors have invited two anthropologists to make a sociological analysis of the project. An important role in voicing the participants’ experience has been played by the fact that each member of the team has been asked to keep a personal diary. In order to facilitate the understanding of the interpretative process to the reader, Bender, Hamilton and Tilley combined in the pages of the book photographs, maps, plans, section drawings, diagrams and tables with descriptions, fragments from the personal diaries and dialogues; also, they inserted an photographic essay and even poems. As the authors make clear, the multivocality of the project does not imply that all interpretations are equally valid: “[...] *even though our interpretative biases affect how we assemble and understand the material evidence, this evidence has an integrity, an ability to resist certain interpretations, narratives, or stories. It is our job to be as rigorous as possible to rethinking and reconceptualising interpretation, narrative and evidence*” (p. 26).

The authors present both the biography of their approach and that of the researched features, as the case with House 1 from the western settlement. Due to its aspect, the survey team considered at the beginning (i.e. before starting the excavation), that the house was transformed into a cairn either when it was abandoned, or when its last occupant died. The excavations led to the modification of this initial interpretation: in a first phase, in Middle Bronze Age, the house was built

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up, lived in, at a certain moment repaired and not transformed into a cairn, and in the end abandoned; later, in the Late Bronze Age, the house was partitioned, the small back area being reoccupied probably by a single person, maximum two. (However, it should be added that other houses, such as House 46 and House 26 had indeed been transformed into cairns at a certain moment of their biographies.) It is also worth mentioning the fact that the research results have been shared with the members of the local community (and not only) through a travelling exhibition and a workshop. The visitors have not been treated as passive consumers of a scientific message “translated” in their language, but they have been stimulated to get involved, to express their own points of view and tell their own stories about the Leskernick landscape.

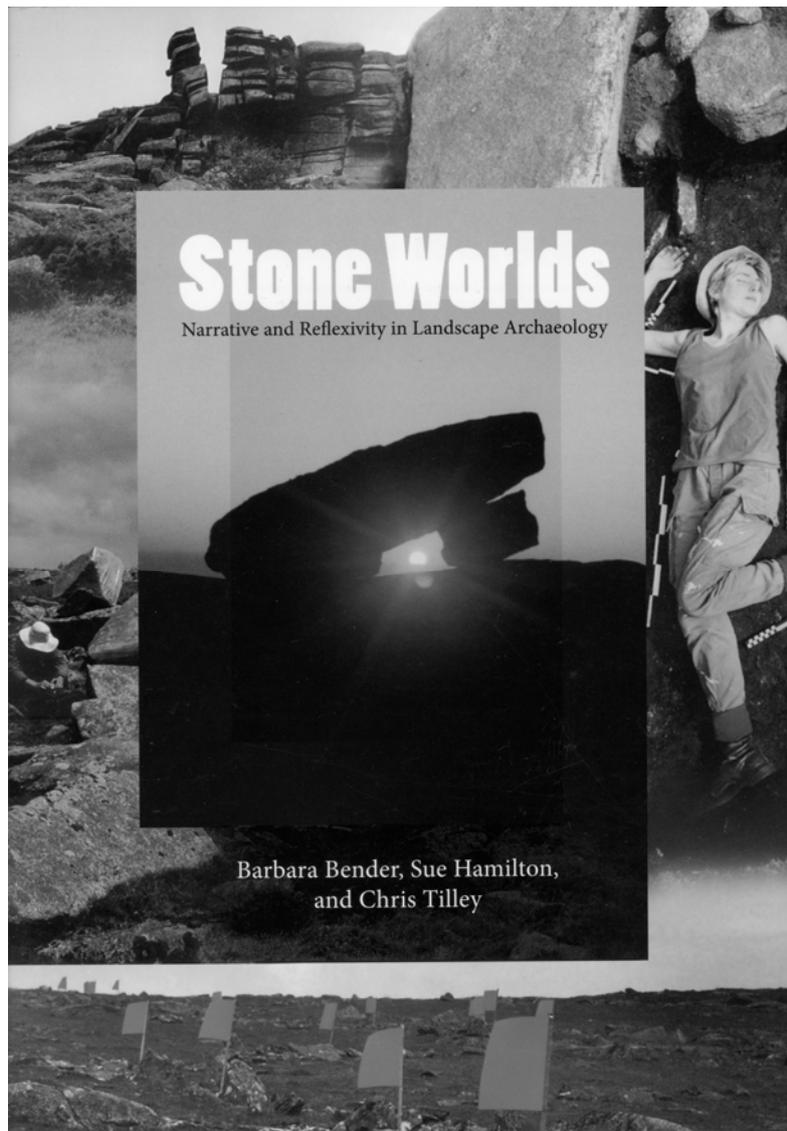


Fig. 1.

In short, *Stone Worlds* is not the usual detailed, rigorous account of an archaeological project. Instead, it proves to be a challenging example of “postprocessual” landscape archaeology, that builds upon polyphonic and interdisciplinary narratives to scrutinize the construction of archaeological knowledge. There are four parts which progressively unfold rarely disclosed publicly but omnipresent details of fieldwork. The first two sections of the book provide an overall account of the Leskernick Hill project methodologies and findings. The reader experiences an almost theatrical lecture, as various voices and characters progressively emerge to expose not only the results and interpretations of the project, but also the interactions and everyday life details which might appear trivial. It is the third

part of the volume that explains the focus on daily routine, as the following four chapters deal with an anthropological approach of the interactions between archaeological practice and interpretation. At this point, the book dives into a high profile debate in British academia, concerning the phenomenological archaeology, not by developing a theoretical statement, but as a reflexive approach on the production of knowledge:

"These chapters are, therefore, not strictly speaking about archaeology – meaning the body of theories and idea about the past that are based upon analysis of material cultural remains – rather, they are about the process of doing archaeology, in its diverse incarnations, in the messy context of our 'real world.'" (p. 239)

Even if someone might say that despite its discourse, the Leskernick Project has remained in practice hierarchically structured (see the texts by the anthropologists), or might argue that the research philosophy does not necessary lead to a different kind of archaeological knowledge, we appreciate, once again, the anti-authoritarian, reflexive, introspective, sensitive and open towards people (archaeologists and non-archaeologists alike) spirit that grounds the approach. That is why *Stone worlds* is a beautiful book.

The Leskernick Project is an example worth following, but unfortunately it is not always possible. Often, the power structure of the projects inhibits the interpretations and initiatives that differ from the official view. For example, within a German-Romanian project concerning the investigation of the Copper Age tell at Pietrele (Giurgiu county, southern Romania), the divergences, uncertainties and the alternative interpretations have been omitted, levelled or censored in the excavation reports, of which style and content have been imposed by one of the project directors (see for details A. Dragoman, S. Oantă-Marghitu 2007). Also, a frequently met situation is that the archaeologist's critical impressions about the place where (s)he works, be it an excavation or an institute/university, are almost never published. A case in point are, for instance, several notes which have never been published, selected from the diary of an archaeozoologist written during one of the excavation seasons at the Copper Age tell at Poduri (Bacău county, eastern Romania) (fig. 2):

"Thursday 9th of July / [...] / As a general observation: a large amount of the material is lost due to the collapse of the trench edges, trench adjustments, to the large amount of material which, at a certain moment can not be managed anymore, to the excavation technique with its faulty delimitation of the levels, etc. Here, while processing the osteol. [osteological] mat. [material] one should not spend a great deal of time with □ [the squares], h, etc. (especially the depths are less significant) and lots of caution is needed in drawing the conclusions." (A. Bolomey 1984-1985)¹

"Friday 12th of July / [...] / From a scientific point of view, the trip was totally insignificant. It is a pity for the site: the excavation is bad and huge amounts of material are lost. From a general point of view, it was mostly funny, some time extremely tensioned, always tiring, and yet a welcomed change of landscape and rhythm." (A. Bolomey 1984-1985)²

The "official" published image is one of a success, that contrasts radically with the image in the above mentioned diary, as can be observed from a book dedicated to the researches at Poduri, entitled *Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, o Troie in Subcarpații Moldovei / Poduri-Dealul Ghindaru, a Troy in the Moldavian Subcarpathians* (see D. Monah *et alii* 2003, pp. 18-21). The archaeologists do not publish their critical thoughts only to respect an academic canon that promotes a practice in which there is no place for introspection, uncertainty, contradiction and/or confrontation. Thus, the reader is offered a homogenized and misleading knowledge. Therefore we believe that the critical reflections must be published in order to contribute to a more sensitive understanding of the ways in which knowledge is being produced.

¹ In original: *"Marți 9 iulie / [...] / Ca o observație generală: o cantitate mare de material se pierde datorită surpării malurilor, a corectării săpăturii, a cantității mari de material care, la un moment dat nu mai poate fi controlat, a tehnicii de săpătură cu delimitarea imperfectă a nivelelor etc. Aici, in prelucrarea mat. [materialului] osteol. [osteologic] nu trebuie pierdut prea mult timp cu □ [carourile], h etc. (mai ales adâncimile sunt puțin semnificative) și trebuie multă precauție în concluzii." (A. Bolomey 1984-1985)*

² In original: *"Vineri 12 iulie / [...] / D. p. d. v. [Din punct de vedere] științific, deplasarea a fost cu totul nesemnificativă. Păcat de stațiune: se sapă prost și se pierde imens de mult material. D. p. d. v. [Din punct de vedere] general a fost uneori amuzant, alteori cu multă tensiune, tot timpul obositor, totuși, totuși, o schimbare de decor și de ritm destul de bine venite." (A. Bolomey 1984-1985)*

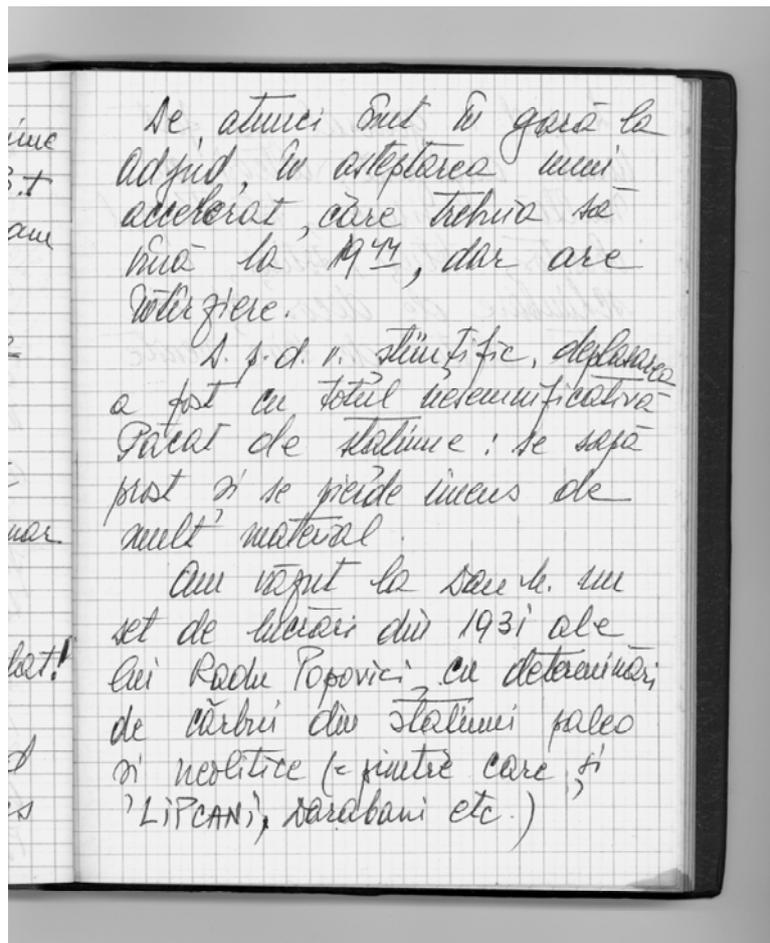


Fig. 2.

The need for a reflexive approach to the production of knowledge is not an issue that arose from archaeology, as it is a common place to most (or all the) disciplines broadly included under social science umbrella. What might be more specific to archaeology is the relatively recent acknowledgment of the issue. In an article published in the interwar period, Edward Sapir (1932) was discussing the need for an interdisciplinary dialog between cultural anthropology and psychiatry, as both would benefit from a better understanding of the relation between society and personality. This early account set the premises for the emergence of a specific research area of medical anthropology, that explored cross-cultural and ethnic differences in the meanings and narratives of illnesses (A. Kleinman 1988). Medical anthropology challenges the idea of an universal medical practice (and especially the biological fundaments of modern medicine) by exploring the bound of illness experiences to specific contexts of the "real" world, as well as the culturally situated nature of medical knowledge, practice and institutions.

Leskernick Project poses some anthropological challenges to archaeology without trying to be "representative". It is more or less part of a wider concern common to most of social sciences. Questioning the current position of the disciplines within the current social and political contexts is summarized by David Featherman in an interview by philosopher Daniel Little:

"I think the situation in sociology is more or less endemic to the rest of social science, but the different disciplines manifest somewhat differently by degrees. My concern with social science is that probably for the period of the last 30 to 40 years, have become increasingly more academic, more theoretical, and that of course, in all to the good in one sense. It displays a good deal of intellectual liveliness, there are more paradigmatic confrontations, but they are at several steps removed from what I think are just important challenges for the world, the everyday world."

(<http://www.changingsociety.org/ChangingSociety/Interviews.html>)

In a lecture entitled "Anthropology, sociology, and other dubious disciplines", Immanuel Wallerstein (2003) explains that the current arrangement of social science research area is a 19th century artifact of the social construction of the disciplines as institutional structures that would greatly benefit from reunification. Other academics debate the need of more applied and interdisciplinary social science, as anthropology, sociology and social science in general might need to step down to the public realm and have a more applicative approach, facing contemporary issues in a pragmatic way. Craig Calhoun and Diana Rhoten (2010) divide interdisciplinary approaches in social sciences into three dominating patterns: social comprehension by using different perspectives, innovation by integration of methodologies from other disciplines and issue driven research (social problems, public concerns, professional practice issues).

For recently reformed (and continuously changing) academic areas like those in Central and Eastern Europe post-communist societies, this debate has special implications. Since 1989, the academic systems in this region have undergone complex changes while moving from a Soviet model that divided teaching (confined to higher education institutions) from research done in the academies of science (P. Sztompka 2002). Struggling overcome 40 years of communism, many disciplines such as sociology or economy traversed periods of theoretical renewal or extensive data collection campaigns, while other disciplines had to be reinvented, as it was the case of political science that departed from its former Marxist-Leninist foundations. Archaeology and social /cultural anthropology are in a slightly different situation. In Romania and most CEE countries, they are disciplines that were previously institutionalized to a certain degree, as institutes in the academies of science, but which still have not made their way into distinct higher education degrees, as young anthropologists are usually graduates of sociology, ethnography or political sciences, while young archaeologists graduate from history.

To summarize, in the last 20 years we witnessed a complex resettlement of social science area in Central and Eastern Europe, with redefinitions of the professional status of most practitioners, with new quality assessment and funding instruments, with new research agendas and sometimes dependency on Western or EU research programs. Yet, some areas seem to persist into a conservative attitude. A particular issue related to archaeology is a certain degree of traditionalism concerning the dominant paradigm of "*mitteleuropäische Archäologie*", recently discussed by Anthony Harding:

"The archaeology syllabus that is taught to Romanian students is of a traditional kind, as far as I can judge from the websites of the universities involved and from my own knowledge of students and teachers. I have met a fair number of such students (former and present), for whom the concepts of 'processual' or 'post-processual' archaeology were totally alien, and whose horizons are those of straightforward culture sequences, pottery typologies and chronologies, and the like." (A. Harding 2009, p. 637)

A couple of years ago and still under the emotion of September 2001, Elemér Hankiss (2002) was suggesting that we entered an "*Age of Uncertainty*", when the foundations of social science have to be reconsidered as "*in recent years, being involved in empirical and analytical studies, we have had less time and energy to discuss the basic issues of our discipline and those of our world*". *Stone Worlds* is a compelling example of how we can start such a quest by going beyond the period of academic "disaster recovery" that followed the 1989 moment and head to our own "Age of Reflexivity".

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