



UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF WRITING IN ARCHAEOLOGY

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Graham Connah, Writing about Archaeology.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.
Pp. xiv + 210, figs 31.

ISBN 978-0-521-86850-1 (hb); 978-0-521-68851-2 (pb).

What role does writing play in archaeology? It was the first question that crossed my mind, when I saw Graham Connah's book *Writing about Archaeology*. It is a very intriguing question, which made me think about how much attention writing has been paid in the context of archaeology. In social and cultural anthropology it is a very prominent theme (a book edited by Clifford and Marcus in 1986 is an example) as in humanitarian sciences in general. But it has not always been so. There is a certain turning point, when writing and language in general became central – a linguistic turn. According to the most common definition a linguistic turn is a change in research focus with an emphasis on how language is used and how it influences the reality: before the linguistic turn there was a common belief that language was a neutral device of forwarding thoughts and reality (Piiromäe 2008). The linguistic turn generated a vast amount of literature about writing in different disciplines.

However, the issue of writing archaeology has not had as much attention as in other social and humanitarian sciences. One of the most recent examples is a book by Brian Fagan (2006) *Writing archaeology: Telling Stories about the Past*, which mainly targets writing popular interest books. Another book about the influences of writing in archaeology is by Rosemary A. Joyce *et al.* (2002) *The Languages of Archaeology: Dialogue, Narrative and Writing* and it is more in line with the concerns of the linguistic turn, than addresses the nature of writing and self-reflexivity. The issue of writing in archaeology has also been the topic of some scholarly articles (Hodder 1989 is an example). Despite of these examples there is still too little literature on the theme of writing archaeology. Therefore the fact that Connah draws attention to writing in the context of archaeology is one of the main merits of the book in question. Even though the way he approaches this topic is more practical and simplified than literature inspired by the linguistic turn.

The author, Graham Connah, has been a practitioner in archaeology for over fifty years. His fieldwork is mainly connected with archaeology in Africa and Australia.

He is the author of eight books and many articles that concentrate on those areas of the world. Currently he is the professor emeritus of the Australian National University and belongs to the Editorial Board of *Australasian Historical Archaeology*, a journal he founded. Many of the examples he uses in the book are based on his extensive experience.

The book *Writing about Archaeology* consists of ten chapters and has 31 monochrome illustrations. Graham Connah's main goal is to make archaeological authors more aware of how writing influences the outcome and draw attention to aspects that should be considered when writing about archaeology. He focuses on classical types of academic writing: the monograph, the article, the textbook. He also addresses briefly popular publications.

Connah covers a vast amount of topics: the importance and role of writing, the importance of reading past writings, intended readership of a writing, the way in which *the spirit of the times* influences writers, grammatical issues, illustrations, publishing, editing, and reception. Each of those topics is covered in a superficial and brief manner. Brevity is one of the main weaknesses of this work, while this approach offers nothing to any kind of audience. As Connah himself states that the book is intended for beginners, therefore the book is quite basic and works as an introduction. For this reason it does not offer much to a more advanced reader. At the same time, for a beginner the issues are discussed too briefly to be useful.

Another problematic aspect I had with the book in question is that it is out of date. This problem was especially visible in chapter 6, which deals with the ways in which writing can be illustrated. Connah discusses only photographs and drawings as illustrations. He also claims that color illustrations are becoming increasingly more available. This claim seems in the context of current publishing technology really old-fashioned. Moreover, Connah does not address the advantages and downsides of internet publications, which is a medium that is widely used, but rarely discussed.

One of his most sweeping and general statements is the final conclusion of this book. *In the end, archaeology is a literary discipline* (p. 189). That statement illustrates the main problem I had with this book: it is too general and it does not say much specifically about archaeology. All the problems addressed in this book would still be fitting if the word *archaeology* in the title would be replaced with any other discipline. For me it shows that even though the author has had good intentions, the book itself has failed in achieving the goals the author has put forward. Archaeology is a specific discipline with its own goals and problems. A book titled *Writing about Archaeology* should, in my opinion, address very specific archaeology related issues – whether how to narrate and construct past ways of life accessed through material fragments found at excavations or the ethical problems of writing short popular overviews.

Connah does not do justice to the importance and role that writing plays in archaeology. The first chapters are encouraging and raise the expectation that the author is going to address for instance the issue of self-reflexivity, but he does not go into any theoretical or ethical problems. Instead the author has chosen a very general approach. However at the same time he frequently claims that the book is not intended as a manual, but a set of author's personal reflections. If it really would be so, then it would be a good book, but instead of writing his personal view, Connah constantly generalizes

and makes universal claims about the process of writing. Those generalizations are exemplified with personal experiences. For a manual there is an adequate amount of personal experience, but to achieve the intended goals a personal approach is lacking. Therefore despite the fact that Connah's book is not meant as a manual, it reads as a defect manual. Consequently this book does not offer much insight into archaeological writing in particular.

However, even though this work is mostly too general, sometimes Connah descends into too much detail. Like for instance in chapter 9, where he discusses, among other things, the technical issues of forwarding a digital copy of the typescript and does so in great detail. What is more, some of the chapters leave the impression that the author has tried to compress too much information into one chapter, which has resulted in odd and undeveloped sub-chapters. A case in point is chapter 5 the main topic of which is the process of writing and where Connah has on less than twenty pages discussed macro- and micro-structures, word choice, spelling, the mechanics of writing and collaborative writing. Instead of concentrating on any of these topics he gives a brief and underdeveloped overview, where the reader is left to wonder how it all connects.

In conclusion, a book about writing should be sharp and inspirational. It should be humorous and give a good example of how one can write a book. Instead Connah has not been able to utilize the full potential of such a post-modern topic and has produced a book that rather is an example of mediocre and mechanical writing, which is also quite outdated in many aspects.

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