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Seeing the Past from Nowhere: Images and Science in Archaeology^{*,†}

Laurent Dissard[‡]

Between 1968 and 1975, international and multidisciplinary rescue excavations were undertaken in Eastern Turkey before the construction of the Keban Dam. This article focuses on three specific visual techniques (the artifact typology, the trench shot, and the gridded map) found in the site reports of this salvage project, in order to analyze the way archaeology visually defines its object(s) of study. While scientific excavations make discoveries of the past visible, their representations in the discipline's final publications conceal the human agents responsible for them. In other words, as tools of visualization foreground archaeological knowledge, the conditions of its production are concurrently sidelined. By relegating the messy process of "digging" to the background, archaeology's techniques of visualization allow its practitioners to see the past, and all of its objects, from a distant present located "nowhere."

"The visualizing technologies are without apparent limit; the eye of any ordinary primate like us can be endlessly enhanced... Vision in this technological feast becomes unregulated gluttony; all perspective gives way to infinitely mobile vision, which no longer seems just mythically about the god-trick of seeing everything from nowhere." (Haraway 1991, 188-9)

I. INTRODUCTION

Archaeologists place a lot of attention in the writing of site reports. Without them, archaeological excavations, in a way, would not exist. Sharon Traweek (1997, 143) has claimed that the purpose of scientific articles is to "announce

* All figures are courtesy of the Middle East Technical University.

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findings and lay claim to a discovery.” To do this, however, a brief and formulaic literary style avails. Scientific accounts, she argues, do not need to reiterate every step of the experiment nor describe all of the activities in a laboratory. Likewise, in archaeological site reports, the complete process of excavation is never fully disclosed. Images—such as maps, charts, plans, graphs, drawings, and photographs—help to witness the fieldwork itself. These visuals, however, can only represent a fraction of it. Like Traweek’s description of scientific articles, the carefully composed pictures and meticulously drawn illustrations of archaeological reports also follow standardized rules and established conventions. It is this concise and succinct visual style of archaeology that constitutes the subject of this article.

Between the years 1968 and 1975, salvage excavations were undertaken in Eastern Turkey before the construction of the Keban Dam. A group of international and multidisciplinary teams came together to document, study, and protect the region’s threatened heritage. Today, the Keban Dam Rescue Project is considered by Turkey’s archaeological community as a turning point in the history of the discipline.¹ In addition to valuable data collected on the successive archaeological and historical phases of the area, the project was deemed a success in terms of its organization, which involved the collaboration of different Turkish and foreign institutions, as well as in terms of the innovative methods it employed and the new theories experimented with in the field. Moreover, the *Keban Project Publications*, placed under the supervision of the Middle East Technical University, have also been taken as a model to be emulated by later research projects. In this article, I have selected three images from these publications: 1. the artifact typology, 2. the trench shot, and 3. the gridded map, in order to analyze the way that archaeologists visually define their object(s) of study.² As I will argue, these

¹ For more details on the collaborative nature of the Keban Dam Rescue Project and its place within the history of Turkish Archaeology, see L. Dissard, “Learning by Doing” Archaeological Salvage Excavations: The Keban Dam Rescue Project (1966-1975) in Eastern Turkey, *Anatolian Studies* (forthcoming).

² In the 1980s and later, the proponents of post-processual archaeology, such as Hodder, Shanks and Tilley, and Wylie, had already begun this analysis: Hodder contextualized the writing of site reports; Molyneaux analyzed the way images shape our perception of the past; and Smiles and Moser examine the role of visuals in archaeological knowledge production. In a more recent volume by Thomas and Oliveira Jorge, I scrutinize the politics of vision of a specific archaeological center built near the Birecik Dam in Southeastern Turkey. See I. Hodder, *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986); M. Shanks and C. Tilley, *Social Theory and Archaeology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); M. Shanks and C. Tilley, *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987); A. Wylie, A Proliferation of New Archaeologies: Beyond Objectivism and Relativism, in *Archaeological Theory: Who Sets the Agenda?*, eds. N. Yoffee, and A. Sherratt, 20-26, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); I. Hodder, Writing archaeology: site reports in context, *Antiquity* 63(239) (1989): 268-274; B.L.

three techniques of visualization—formulaic representations recurrently found within site reports—can have unanticipated effects on field research. When archaeologists visualize the past in this manner, what other things, if not entirely excluded, become marginalized from the scientific process?

II. ARTIFACTS

Only a limited number of objects unearthed by archaeologists make their appearance in site reports.³ At different moments of the excavations, aesthetic and ontological judgments are made by the excavators, which privilege certain things and exclude others. From the multitude of objects discovered, only the interesting or unique ones are selected. The others, considered redundant or obsolete, are rejected. What the reader sees in the final publications of archaeology is, in fact, the outcome of these choices. In an effort to locate the earliest appearance of “objectivity” in the sixteenth century, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (1992, 84) define scientific atlases as “profusely illustrated volumes of carefully chosen observables—bodily organs, constellations, flowering plants, instrument readings—depicted from a carefully chosen point of view.” In these atlases, Nature’s diverse, accidental, and contingent experiences are represented by “working images,” ideal types that may or may not have been found as such.⁴ Likewise, archaeological reports transform the past’s too plentiful and unrefined things into a selection of “working objects.” For instance, typologies, commonly found in the discipline’s scientific accounts, display artifacts as a manageable representation of the past.

A sharp disparity exists between the messy on-site excavations, full of the activities of human agents, and the orderly account of these excavations found in the final reports.⁵ The latter is composed of an almost immaculate

Molyneaux, ed., *The Cultural Life of Images, Visual Representation in Archaeology*, (London: Routledge, 1997); S. Smiles, and S. Moser, eds., *Envisioning the Past: Archaeology and the Image*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005); and L. Dissard, Politics and Archaeology in Turkey’s G.A.P. Region: scientific practices and visualizing techniques, in *Archaeology and the Politics of Vision in a Post-Modern Context*, eds. J. Thomas, and V. Oliveira Jorge, 306-329, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2009).

³ If the Latin *reportare* simply meant to carry back, the verb *reporting* can be defined as giving a spoken or written account of something that one has observed, heard, done, or investigated. In both cases, the reporter is only a messenger, contributing nothing of his or her own. Thus, in the term “report” itself, the process by which human agency disappears behind the facts or events being reported is already emphasized.

⁴ In other words, “nature is full of diversity, but science cannot be” (Daston and Galison 1992, 90).

⁵ Bruno Latour and Steven Woolgar have already noticed the great contrast between the cost and size of the material in a scientific laboratory and the final published report full of paper with graphs. See B. Latour and S. Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Techniques*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979).

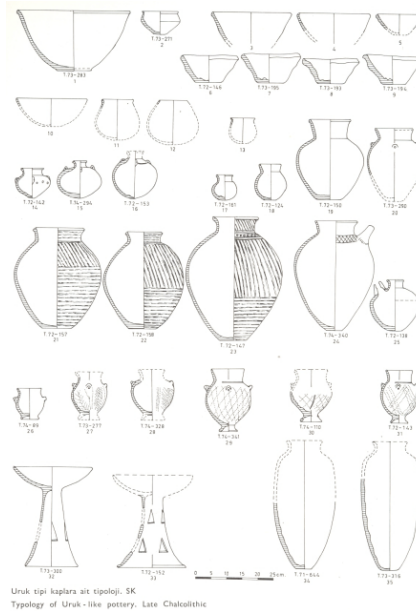


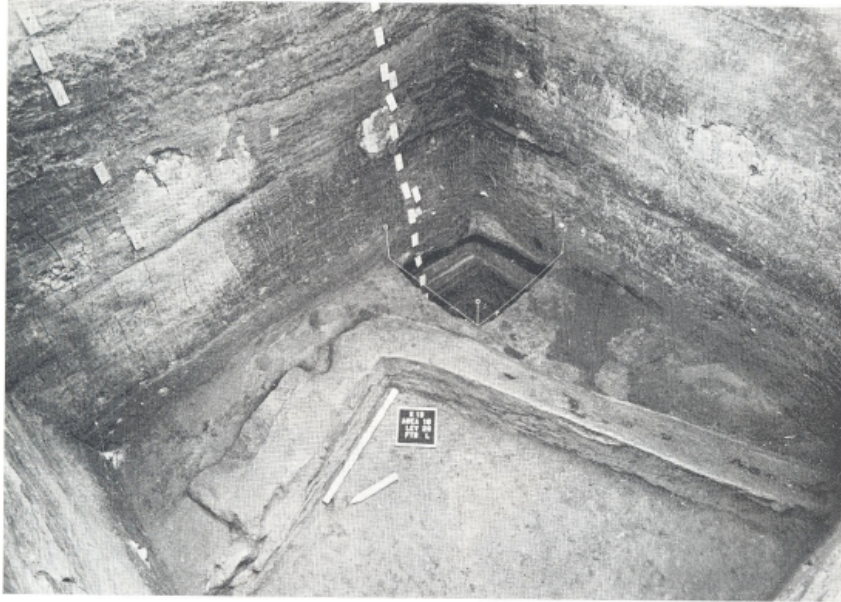
Figure 1. Esin 1982, pl. 72. The artifact typology.

series of pages quite distinct from the untidy, sometimes chaotic, process of “digging.” Part of the archaeological process consists in displaying things removed from the ground as spotless and orderly. Oftentimes, these artifacts are drawn or photographed positioned side-by-side in neatly organized rows and columns. In the black-and-white drawing above, 35 excavated pots, lined up according to their shape and size, are presented in a formalized and conventional arrangement (see Figure 1). Categorized in a typology, shown by stratigraphic unit, these drawings of broken and repaired, but seemingly untainted, vessel forms force the reader’s gaze away from the untidy mounds of earth they originated from. In the end, by displaying their objects of study as sanitized and purified data, archaeologists transform the raw experience of the field into a digested one.

III. TRENCHES

In a site report, one can read about the context of unearthed objects, the physical appearance of soil layers, or the relationship between architectural elements. Moreover, the publications are filled with precise drawings, detailed plans and up-close photographs, which help to witness the excavations. Steven Shapin and Simon Schaffer (1985) have demonstrated how “witnessing” emerges as a key principle of seventeenth-century science. To be held credible, Thomas Boyle’s experiments had to be directly witnessed by the eyes of society and were thus collectively performed in the public space of the laboratory as opposed to the alchemist’s closet. Moreover, the two historians explain how Boyle’s

written reports allowed the experimental process to be “virtually” witnessed. They gave readers a vivid impression of the experimental scene by including carefully composed illustrations of the machines used in the laboratory such as the air-pump. Visualizing experiments in this way, Shapin and Schaffer (1985, 59-61) argue, would help others replicate them elsewhere. Archaeological excavations differ from other scientific experiments in one important aspect. Once performed, they can never be repeated. Data retrieved from a site cannot be reproduced. Subsequently, if archaeological publications help to visualize excavations, unlike Boyle’s scientific reports, they are not aimed at helping others replicate them. Nevertheless, images in archaeology play a large part in facilitating virtual witnessing. By capturing particular moments in the field, photographs give readers a vivid impression of the excavation scene and announce that, indeed, the archaeological experiment “was really done.”⁶



I Korucutepe. İlk Kalkolitik Çağ'a ait evin duvarları ve tabanı, aşağı yukarı M.Ö. 4500-4000
Walls and floor of Early Chalcolithic house at Korucutepe, about 4500-4000 B.C.

Figure 2. van Loon and Güterbock 1972, pl. 54. The trench shot.

Before a photograph is taken of an archaeological site, a sort of purification ritual takes place. Archaeologists sweep and scrape clean the area under excavation that is about to be captured on film. Pickaxes, brushes and trowels (equipment necessary for excavating) are momentarily placed to the side.

⁶ “The images served to announce, as it were, that ‘this was really done’ and that ‘it was done in the way stipulated.’ They allayed distrust and facilitated virtual witnessing. Therefore, understanding the role of pictorial representations offers a way of appreciating what Boyle was trying to achieve with his literary technology” (Shapin and Schaffer 1985, 62).

Workers are asked to step outside of the frame. The photographer, “hiding” behind the camera, then captures the last moment of this ritual, the final outcome, but not the messy process itself. The end results are stylized shots of excavation squares with absolutely no people in them (see Figure 2). Human agency has been rendered invisible.⁷ In most reports, three tools are placed within the frame of photographs capturing the newly excavated area: a measuring stick indicates scale; an arrow provides orientation; and letters and numbers, sometimes placed on a blackboard, specify the date and name of the square. Strategically positioned within its borders, these three instruments transform a banal picture into a record that can be catalogued, analyzed, and compared. Having thus acquired scientific legitimacy, the photograph becomes part of an organized system that helps to systematically document field research.

IV. GRIDS

The grid system, today, is such a widely accepted disciplinary technique that archaeologists no longer question its use. Lines running from north to south and east to west cross at right angles, dividing a landscape into an infinite number of squares. The areas to be excavated are chosen in between these intersecting parallel and perpendicular lines. “Digging” is now organized following right-angle trenches. With this tool, a space is appropriated and transformed into a measurable and controllable environment. Nature is further rationalized and made suitable for scientific study. But, because the grid has been so internalized, it is important to remember some of the unexpected effects it can produce. The technique does not only regulate archaeological practice. In addition to its tremendous organizational power, it governs the way sites are visualized and the past envisioned. In an archaeological report, fieldwork is almost always represented on a topographic plan superimposed with a grid. Through its particular lens, a three-dimensional landscape is transformed into a two-dimensional representation. Disparate pieces of land are flattened into smooth and leveled images. Geographical unevenness is erased. Variable and disparate topographies are straightened so that objects unearthed can be arranged as artifacts in the most rational and logical way.

Instruments of visualization, Donna Haraway (1991; 1997) explains, have helped to distance the knowing subject from the object of study and shaped

⁷ “[W]hat we find in site reports are stylised shots of individual artefacts (strategically lit and arranged against neutral backgrounds), and carefully composed shots of archaeological deposits (brushed, tidied, squared-away and labeled). These form a class of imagery from which coworkers and assistants are edited out, along with extraneous items of equipment, signs of camp life, collapsed sections and misplaced artefacts, in fact, any signs of production of failure” (Shepherd 2003, 350).

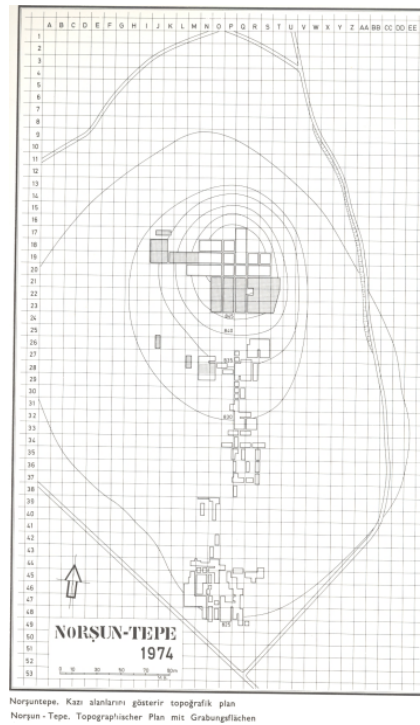


Figure 3. Hauptmann 1982, pl. 27. The gridded site.

our modern western sense of reality. Images in science, she adds, are never passive or unmediated. They only represent a partial way of organizing and seeing the world, one visual possibility among others.⁸ Like other scientific inquiries, archaeology requires both techniques of visualization and a politics of positioning on the part of its practitioners. What do archaeologists see after applying the grid system to their excavations? How do they position themselves when using such an instrument?⁹ The grid delineates the boundaries within which scientific excavations are performed (see Figure 3). Its axis and coordinates define the outdoor laboratory of archaeology. Viewed from the

⁸ “There is no unmediated photograph or passive camera obscura in scientific accounts of bodies and machines; there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds. All these pictures of the world should not be allegories of infinite mobility and interchangeability, but of elaborate specificity and difference and the loving care people might take to learn how to see faithfully from another’s point of view, even when the other is our own machine” (Haraway 1991, 190).

⁹ “Histories of science may be powerfully told as histories of the technologies. These technologies are ways of life, social orders, practices of visualization. Technologies are skilled practices. How to see? Where to see from? What limits to vision? What to see for? Whom to see with? Who gets to have more than one point of view? Who gets blinkered? Who wears blinkers? Who interprets the visual field? What other sensory powers do we wish to cultivate besides vision?” (Haraway 1997, 33).

top, the space of scientific research is depicted as a flattened piece of land. Ultimately, this particular technique of visualization not only helps in the creation of a scientific space, it also empowers archaeologists to view their site from above. Having acquired a god's eye-view of their object of study, archaeologists position themselves as the past's invisible witnesses, seeing everything from the supposedly apolitical nowhere. In the end, photographs of neatly ordered potsherds, images of purified excavation squares, as well as maps depicting sites as flattened grids, reinforce the position of the archaeologist as an invisible witness, and strengthen the objectivity of scientific archaeology.¹⁰

V. CONCLUSION

As artifacts are classified and typologies established, as cameras capture images of sanitized trenches, and as the grid demarcates even further archaeology's outdoor laboratories, what things, in this process of visualization, become marginalized? In an insightful article, Nick Shepherd (2003) uses the photographs found in the publications of John Goodwin's archaeological expeditions in sub-Saharan Africa to scrutinize the issue of native labor in archaeology. He argues that the work of Goodwin's "natives" has, thus far, remained unacknowledged in the history of African archaeology. Goodwin's co-workers are not, however, entirely invisible from his archives, making unexpected appearances, for instance, in the margins of photographs. By "rethinking" through the official accounts of archaeology and, more specifically, finding the names of Goodwin's native workers, Shepherd succeeds in restoring their dignity and making visible one formerly concealed type of colonial domination.

The present article has demonstrated how tools of visualization simultaneously foreground archaeological knowledge while sidelining the conditions of its production. Excavations make discoveries and make the past visible while representations of these excavations make the human agents responsible for them invisible. Archaeological photographs reduce fieldwork to a collection of neatly arranged objects and methodically cleaned squares, omitting the people and labor behind it. The presence of humans, their acts and practices, are sidelined from the grid and, more generally, actively obscured in the publication of scientific results. This article has shown the sharp contrast existing between the untidy on-site excavations and their purified version in

¹⁰ The focus of this article has been on techniques commonly used in the 1970s such as drawings, photographs and grids. It could have been argued that more recent techniques of visualization such as ground-penetrating radars, computer-based Geographic Information Systems (GIS), or satellite imagery also sideline the discipline's conditions of production. In more recent reports and, more particularly, with the use of digital technology, attempts have been made by archaeologists to simultaneously display finds and be more explicit about the manner in which these have been obtained.

the reports. It has also argued that the positioning of archaeologists as invisible witnesses plays a critical role in the production of scientific knowledge about the past. While generating the discipline's purified "working objects," archaeological photographs, drawings and maps bolster the report's objectivity by "taking the dirt out" of it and forcing readers to focus away from the life behind the work. As the disorderliness of excavations is relegated to the background and human agency is displaced onto the objects themselves, archaeology's techniques of visualization succeed in allowing its practitioners to see the past, and all of its objects, from a distant present located "nowhere."

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