

Argentinian archaeology: status and prospects

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Introduction

The many centuries of Argentinian archaeology have been studied by a number of scholars (e.g. Fernández 1982; Crivelli 1990; Politis 1995, 2003, 2007; Nastri 1999, 2004; Ramundo 2007a, 2008a, 2008c; Borrazzo *et al.* 2009). Although the analysis of current topics in the discipline and a tentative view on its future will be the aim of this critical appraisal, it does not pretend to be exhaustive, but the starting point for enriching the discussion. Amongst the topics briefly addressed are the plurality of theoretical frameworks, the variety of areas of specialisation, the protection of archaeological heritage, ethical aspects of the discipline, an analysis of academic training and the relationship between archaeology and local and/or aboriginal communities.

Plurality of frameworks

Argentinian archaeology has a range of theoretical-methodological frameworks that compete for leadership (Ramundo 2008a). We tend to talk about 'theoretical-methodological frameworks' instead of 'paradigms' because we understand that local archaeology has never experienced a period of 'normal science' (*sensu* Kuhn 1978), that is, a stage where only one 'paradigm' establishes the rules legitimating scientific production and guiding research. In this way, we may support the idea of a partial consensus, or think that we are still in a period of 'pre-science', where the activity is disorganised and diverse (Ramundo 2008a).

I consider, however, that this conflict between theoretical frameworks is not as strong as it used to be—current pluralism is more tolerant to difference, by word of mouth at least. Higher tolerance is perhaps the result of the many years of silence and lack of theoretical variability imposed by the former military government (1976–1983), and/or because access to foreign schools of thought is now more readily available. This situation is affected by the ever-present economic shortcomings, which impact on access to updated bibliography and the possibility of attending specific events both locally and elsewhere. Furthermore, the lack of open access mass media technology in the past (e.g. the internet) should not be neglected. The new multiplicity of views may also be due to the receding influence of the 'personality as an authority', so prevalent in previous times (Ramundo 2008a), as well as an increased disciplinary maturity.

In the mid 1990s, the New Archaeology was a 'collective option' that determined the reception of other schools from abroad (Farro *et al.* 1999: 223). But some local archaeologists

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have sensed the exhaustion of its models and demanded the reincorporation of cultural factors that, although studied in the past, were scarcely utilised to evaluate historical change: ritual and symbolic issues, studies on social conflict, domination, inequality and social complexity. The incorporation of post-processual schools of thought was becoming more evident, leading to opposing views that struggled to prevail and effect change. A theoretical shift was noticeable in the symposia and workshops taking place in national archaeological congresses and similar events, as well as in specific journals (Ramundo 2007a). Nevertheless, in these same events and journals, papers were written that adopted older approaches, without in any way diminishing the quality of these journals and papers.

The current theoretical scene is a palimpsest, where 'normative' archaeologists who adhere to the European historical-cultural school of thought (the typical approach since the 1930s) coexist with radical and moderate processualists (who have led the theoretical agenda since the 1980s) and post-processualists who feed on traditional Marxism, neo-Marxism and cognitive views, amongst others. These differ in terms of the explanations they provide, but also in their concepts of evidence, data, context and archaeological record. The current millennium finds Argentinian archaeology utilising multiple methodological and technical approaches, often selected independently of the underlying theoretical framework. There is also a mood of coexistence between old and new generations. The new generations understand that the internal confrontations of the past, which so worried previous generations, have not been—and will not be—the path of further disciplinary advance. More frequent dialogue and discussion, based on critical rather than sterile reflection, with a diversity of approaches appropriate to the specific questions to be considered, will probably set a more fruitful path than the former conflicts.

An explosion of specialist areas and their relationship with mass media

In the 1990s archaeological research was hampered by a scarcity of resources, particularly for fieldwork, and in some cases researchers were restricted to laboratory analyses. Research grants were often approved, but without financing. Things have since improved, and there now exist a number of sources of research grants, such as the national universities, the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) and the Agencia Nacional de Promoción Científica y Tecnológica (ANCyT). A wider range of specialist areas has developed, many of them as a consequence of specific socio-historical contexts. The best example is the development of forensic anthropology during the last decade—the result of the historical situation triggered by the last military government (1976–83), when thousands of citizens 'disappeared'. The return of democracy encouraged the creation of the Argentinian Group of Forensic Anthropology (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense, EAAF), a scientific non-profit NGO that applies archaeological forensic sciences to the investigation of human rights violations. The EAAF also has an international profile working across the world. However, this is not the only group dedicated to this speciality.

The social context has also impacted the development of other specialisations such as urban and historical archaeology, the result of pressure on modern towns. In many, though not all, of these investigations the interests of private and national companies are involved

through the development of public works projects such as motorways, gas pipelines and reconstruction. Archaeologists are paid for their services after the project has been tendered. Urban and historical archaeology does not usually require the long-distance transport of workers or equipment, so there is deemed to be no need to pay for housing or, often, staff maintenance. In an urban environment, the budget is therefore reduced in many instances.

Archaeology in the media

Archaeological activity in towns attracts rapid dissemination of research results by the mass media, who are already on the scene, making these studies more visible to the general public and financial bodies. Other specialisms have made front-page news. High-mountain archaeology has developed greatly, because their finds—mainly mummies—generate strong public interest. The earliest high-mountain discoveries date back to the first half of the twentieth century, with Dr Schobinger's research and surveys. Yet the discoveries made at the end of 1990s were the ones to impact nationally and worldwide. Dr Ceruti has given new impulse to the research area, participating in a large number of climbs and archaeological rescue digs of these sanctuaries, accompanied by international research teams. One of the digs, financed by National Geographic, included the excavation of three mummies discovered at 6700m asl, on the summit of the Lulllaillaco volcano in the province of Salta, which were brought down together with their assemblages of ceremonial objects. These finds are now exhibited in the Museo de Alta Montaña, generating important revenue for the province, but also generating some conflict from communities that were self-defined as descendants of the mummies.

Another area of specialisation that has had phenomenal development and a prominent place in the media is underwater archaeology. From 1995, the Instituto Nacional de Antropología y Pensamiento Latinoamericano (INAPL) has had a programme funded by the Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación to study and protect underwater heritage in Argentinian jurisdiction. The project is directed by Dr Elkin and comprises a team of specialists from different disciplines that relate archaeology to naval construction, marine biology, conservation and legislation. Among current projects, we have the study of the British ship *HMS Swift*, whose research results were disseminated to both the scientific community and the general public through seminars, exhibitions and a documentary. The INAPL keeps a record of underwater sites and a database that includes thousands of sunken ships since the sixteenth century. Research is centred in Pampa and Patagonia because of their long Atlantic coastlines. It is important to mention that this type of research demands important financial investment given the need for specific equipment, as well as diving and underwater retrieval training costs.

Moreover, for the past few years, newspapers are interested in highlighting—probably as a way to raise credibility—the institutional affiliations of the archaeologist involved. Thus, in the same piece of news there are frequent mentions of the CONICET, the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) or the University of La Plata (UNLP) as institutional references. It is also noteworthy that for certain topics, the newspapers recurrently resort to the same specialist, neglecting more relevant researchers, probably because, until recently, research institutions did not promote the dissemination of their activities in the media; there was

apparently no 'benefit' in it for scholars. Many archaeologists still refuse to have any contact with the media, under the premise that it minimises the 'scientific aura' of their work, forgetting that one of the most important aims of archaeology—as a social science—is to disseminate its results. At the same time, many researchers do not consider themselves able to carry out the activity of writing for the general public in a language that is accessible to a wider readership.

It may be said that after an obvious drop in media interest during the last military government, with the consolidation of democracy and especially during the last decade, the amount of news discussing archaeologically-related issues, such as heritage protection and archaeological tourism, has been truly significant (Ramundo 2008b, 2009a, 2009b).

The protection of archaeological heritage

The discovery of the Llullaillaco mummies also led to a heated debate in 1999 in which deficiencies in archaeological heritage policy and the need for a new law were highlighted. Furthermore, the discussion included the adoption of rules of professional behaviour towards heritage issues, including the position of indigenous communities and their participation in decision-making (Rodríguez *et al.* 1999). Thus after 90 years of a heritage protection law (Law no. 9080 of 1913) which was hastily passed and never enforced (Ramundo 2007b), this and other events provoked important changes in heritage protection. The publication of Dr Berberían's PhD dissertation (1992) and a number of related actions set the basis for a much-needed heritage law. Another important milestone was the amendment to the Constitution in 1994 that endorses in Article 41 the right of protection of natural and cultural heritage. Provinces and town councils updated their legislation—compensating for the lack of a national law—in order to protect their local heritage (Endere 2000).

Eventually, all these efforts prompted the passing of new laws by the National Congress for the protection of the heritage and the interests of indigenous peoples. Law no. 25517 (2001, regulated by the decree 701/10 in 2010) stated that archaeologists need a permit from local communities, as well as from national and provincial bodies, to undertake fieldwork in areas where these communities live. It also established the restitution of human remains deposited in museums and/or private and public collections to the aboriginal people that demanded them. As a result, some members of the archaeological community offered the Instituto Nacional de Asuntos Indígenas, the main organisation charged with receiving claims and executing the corresponding restitution, their collaboration as specialists in the different areas of archaeology, anthropology and related disciplines in order to enact this law.

Law no. 25743 of 2003 was designed to protect the archaeological and paleontological heritage more broadly. This allows for the creation of a national record of archaeological sites, collections and objects, as well as a list of offences. It delegates the granting of permits to carry out surveys and research to specific organisations, and specifies strict eligibility conditions for the granting of such permits. Furthermore, it includes the need to ask for a permit to take archaeological material out of the country for their study. The law is nonetheless controversial (Berberían 2004); for example, in its lack of dissemination (i.e. failure to communicate its substance to the general public), its superficiality (failure to recognise that

the damage produced by a non-expert on archaeological material is always irretrievable), and the lack of a policing unit specifically trained in the handling of archaeological materials.

Ethical aspects and the social role of the discipline

In 1997 the Asociación de Arqueólogos Profesionales de la República Argentina (AAPRA) was born. It is a scientific, guild and professional organisation that brings together professional archaeologists regardless of political, scientific, philosophical or religious affiliation, and whether employed in teaching, scientific and/or academic institutions. One of its main contributions was to reach a consensus among its members for the first professional ethics code in 2010 (Asociación del Arqueólogos Profesionales de la República Argentina 2010), which settles a series of duties for the exercise of the profession, archaeological heritage, the relationship between archaeologists and the community; for instance indicating that it is necessary to promote a positive interaction between them. It also provides clear guidelines for the dissemination of research and, more importantly, it defines the proper relationship between colleagues.

Aboriginal communities participated for the first time in a national congress of archaeology in 2004 (15th CNAA), discussing questions about the social implications of archaeological research. The closing debate at this conference was again on the removal of the mummies from the Lullaillaco, which were claimed by native communities. A motion was passed that vetoed the exhibition of human bodies in museums, which is only partly followed in the country, as seen in the case of the present exhibition of the Lullaillaco mummies in Salta. The development of the social role of the archaeologist was also evident during the 1st and 2nd Meeting on Archaeological Practice and Communities of the Argentinian Northwest (Encuentro sobre práctica arqueológica y comunidades del Noroeste Argentino) held in 2009 and 2010 in the presence of different communities, and obtained their agreement on important issues.

Academic training

There is a wide diversity of institutions where archaeology is taught, and all of them are quite different. For this reason I will restrict the discussion to my own university, the University of Buenos Aires (UBA). Here there has been an important increase in the number of candidates opting for archaeology within the wider anthropology degree, an increase that cuts two ways. On the one hand it is encouraging that new generations are interested in studying the past, but on the other, the career advancement prospects both in research and teaching, are greatly reduced. The research framework had been forced to increase the number of grant holders and researchers in the recent past, but in the last few years the bottle has been corked again, with ever tougher conditions required of new candidates aspiring to a research career. Moreover, the possibilities of paid university teaching are scarce. So, the big question is where the large number of students will work when they graduate.

Many archaeology students in the UBA do not have to work on the side during their degree, but those that do have only limited opportunities to participate in research projects, due to timetable conflicts. Some graduated students have never been on fieldwork as it is not

compulsory within the present academic syllabus. As regards this and related topics, for the past few years lecturers and students of the UBA have demanded a much-needed syllabus reform. From our point of view this reform should urgently include courses in ethics, legal aspects, heritage management, article-writing workshops and, of course, a compulsory number of fieldwork activities for undergraduate students.

Another aspect that ought to be considered is the lack of academic ability that some students show throughout their academic life. This may be due to a deficient high school education, as many students enter university without the required proficiency in text interpretation, critical thought or literary precision. This situation directly affects university training, as some professors tend to lower academic requirements—especially when evaluating exams—to make up for evident deficiencies. Although it may be a student problem, it reflects on the teachers as well. If we are planning a syllabus reform, we must see it as a tool to improve education and think about what kind of future archaeologists our country needs.

Old and new problems

Since the beginning of the discipline in Argentina (Ramundo 2008a) there has existed a problem that is not strictly archaeological, but affects it to a worrying extent. We are talking about the primacy of the personal over the professional. Stories from former generations tell of researchers laid off, or who could not even be promoted, because of personal or political antipathies. Old grudges between directors are transferred to the new generations, although they sometimes do not know the reason for the original enmity and have not even met the people involved. This situation is dragged into the present and is commonly seen in situations such as the peer review of papers and projects. Screened by anonymous review, some research papers are not evaluated on their own merits but on who wrote them. This is far from being scientific. If the reviewers consider the work to be inaccurate and should be improved, why do they hide behind anonymity? This is one situation where the primacy of the personal over the professional sphere can still flourish.

Another old problem that rears its head again today is the relationship between archaeology and local communities, some self-defined as aboriginal groups. In the past, this relationship was stigmatised by a strong colonial perspective where the archaeologist undertook fieldwork for a period of time and then disappeared with an archaeological record that local populations would never see again. We must remember that some archaeological remains, like gold and silver objects, have an obvious commercial value that may also be of interest to the communities. That is why the difference between the archaeologist and the looter was not one necessarily made by local people. This image has not been superseded. Aboriginal peoples, led by political, economic, social and other interests, now demand a larger participation in what relates to their past, by way of claims that originate both internally and externally. This is evident in the implementation of heritage laws, in the granting of permits by local communities to carry out fieldwork, and in the demand for the restitution of human remains. All these regulations are now an essential part of the archaeological routine. Archaeologists, as social researchers, have an obligation to adhere to them, to give back to aboriginal

communities another possible interpretation of the past while, at the same time, having the unique opportunity to repair the negative image generated by years of colonialism.

In general, there are reasons to be cheerful. Bucking the general trend in Latin America, Argentinian archaeology has always benefited from research grants (by CONICET, ANPCyT and national universities). A lot of that research is focused on diverse aspects of the societies that lived in our country in the past. We must acknowledge that the newly-graduated generations are interested in improving on this knowledge. And, finally, remember that there is still time for institutions of higher education to provide the new generations with better tools to achieve these aims. We should not miss any opportunities to re-evaluate our work on both the local and the global stage.

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