

WHAT MEAN THESE STONES? ARCHAEOLOGY, POETRY & MYSTERY

Ted W. Wright on Excavating Humanity

The mystic does not bring doubts or riddles: the doubts and riddles exist already. We all feel the riddle of the earth without anyone to point it out. The mystery of life is the plainest part of it. The clouds and curtains of darkness, the confounding vapours, these are the daily weather of this world. Whatever else we have grown accustomed to, we have grown accustomed to the unaccountable. Every stone or flower is a hieroglyphic of which we have lost the key; with every step of our lives we enter into the middle of some story which we are certain to misunderstand.

G.K. Chesterton¹

Archaeology, poetry, and mystery may seem like strange bedfellows at first glance, but they go together hand in glove. It is no accident that one of the greatest mystery writers of the twentieth century, Agatha Christie, was married to an archaeologist. In 1928

¹ G.K. Chesterton, *William Blake* (London: Duckworth and Company, 1910), 13.

Christie visited the ancient archaeological site of Ur in Iraq. Ur is one of the oldest cities on earth. It was at Ur that Christie met her husband, Max Mallowan. Six months after they met, they married. Christie traveled extensively with her archaeologist husband to sites in both Syria and Iraq.² Not only did she travel with Mallowan, she got involved in his excavations and became competent herself in the field, assisting in the cataloging and analyzing of artifacts as they were excavated from the earth. In addition to assisting her husband, Christie also devoted her time to writing. Influenced by both her experiences in World Wars I and II, and by helping to excavate archaeological sites with her husband, Christie penned some of the most memorable and popular novels of the twentieth century, including *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Death on the Nile* and *Murder on the Orient Express*. Mystery, archaeology and literature all converge in the writings and person of Agatha Christie. She is not alone in this interesting connection.

My thesis is simple — the poet and the archaeologist ultimately have the same goal — to bring to light what lies beneath the surface — to explain and expound on what is mysterious and elusive — to “excavate humanity,” as it were. I myself am an archaeologist who also loves the written word, and my experience has led me to the conclusion that both human artifacts and actions tell similar stories through their symbolic nature. The archaeologist excavates, analyzes, and interprets artifacts. The poet attempts to dig up, communicate, and

² See, Laura Thomson, *Agatha Christie: A Mysterious Life* (New York: Pegasus Books, 2018), 72-109.

articulate the truth of human experience. Although the archaeologist and the poet utilize different methods, they share a common goal to illuminate the mysteries of existence. I contend that the bedrock of both disciplines is *reality* itself— what *is*.

Rare in the world of archaeology is the scholar with one foot in poetic reflection and one in science. Years ago I was introduced to the illuminating thoughts of Loren Eiseley. Eiseley was an archaeologist-anthropologist whose musings on his profession invite thoughtful reflection. In his book, *The Night Country: Reflections of a Bone-Hunting Man* (1971), Eiseley pinpoints humanity's primal desire to seek out and illuminate what is hidden in the darkness.

If you cannot bear the silence and the darkness, do not go there; if you dislike black night and yawning chasms, never make them your profession. If you fear the sound of water hurrying through crevices toward unknown and mysterious destinations, do not consider it. Seek out the sunshine. It is a simple prescription. Avoid the darkness.

It is a simple prescription, but you will not follow it. You will turn immediately to the darkness. You will be drawn to it by cords of fear and longing. You will imagine that you are tired of the sunlight; the waters that unnerve you will tug in the ancient recesses of your mind; the midnight will seem restful – you will end by going down.

. . . You go down zigzagging and sliding through some accidental tremendous fissure torn in the bowels of the earth. Great stones

teeter over you. This is the country of Charon and Cerberus; from this the pleasant fields draw sustenance.³

Eiseley's observation is a profound one. It is not what we know, but what we do not know — mysteries in the darkness, which fuels our thirst for knowledge and understanding. For as long as humans have been on the earth, mysterious stones, partially buried in the earth, have drawn us to seek to understand their significance and meaning -- archaeology. As a relatively young science, archaeology — the study of human artifacts — has merely brought additional mysteries and riddles to be solved. After over a century of digging, what indeed is the true significance of Stonehenge in England? Göbeklitepe in Turkey? The Great Pyramids of Egypt? The great cities, temples, gardens, and theaters of ancient Rome? Earthen pyramids and mysterious mounds that have been discovered in North and South America?

Who is better to articulate these mysteries: the poet or the archaeologist? Or some combination of the two — the *archaeo-poet*? From the very earliest levels of human civilization, humans seem to have held a deeply religious (perhaps even poetic) relationship with their past and their ancestors. The site of Jericho, located in Israel, is most well-known by Christians as the city where Joshua marched around its walls, which came falling down after the seventh lap and a blast of the ram's horn.⁴ But, in the deepest and earliest foundations of Jericho, in a period archaeologists call the Pre-Pottery Neolithic (ca. 8500-

³ Loren Eiseley, *The Night Country: Reflections of a Bone Hunting Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971), 15,17.

⁴ See Joshua 6.

5200 B.C.), human skulls were found buried under the floors of family dwellings. The skulls were curiously plastered in clay, with sea shells in the eye sockets and traces of paint indicating a desire to present them in a life-like appearance.⁵ Because it is so early in human history, and human writing would not be invented until around the 3rd millennium B.C., archaeologists have been at a loss to articulate the full significance and meaning of the plastered skulls buried beneath the floors of these early homes. They merely state that the skulls were cultic (i.e., *religious*) in nature and may indicate early ancestor worship. At least since Cain killed Abel, humans have been holding up skulls and pondering the mystery of death, the problem of evil, and the destiny of humanity.

Perhaps one of the most well-known musings in literature on this question is in Act 5, Scene 1 in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Here, Hamlet and Horatio happen upon some gravediggers who hold up a skull.

Gravedigger: (*indicates a skull*) *Here's a skull now. This skull has lain in the earth three-and-twenty years.*

Hamlet: *Whose was it?*

Gravedigger: *A whoreson mad fellow's it was. Whose do you think it was?*

Hamlet: *Nay, I know not.*

Gravedigger: *A pestilence on him for a mad rogue! He*

⁵ Ehud Netzer, "Jericho," in David Noel Freedman, Editor in Chief, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 3 H-J (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 729.

poured a flagon of Rhenish on my head once. This same skull, sir, was Yorick's skull, the king's jester.

Hamlet: *Let me see. (takes the skull) Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio, a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times, and now, how abhorred in my imagination it is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. —Where be your gibes now? Your gambols? Your songs? Your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chapfallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. Make her laugh at that . . .*

...Imperious Caesar, dead and turned to clay,
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away.

Oh, that that earth which kept the world in a
we
Should patch a wall t'expel the winter's flaw!

But soft, but soft, aside!⁶

Here, Hamlet is an archaeologist who has been transformed into a philosopher and poet. What lies beneath the surface must be uncovered, excavated, and articulated. Should this not be the goal of all archaeology? To ask the larger and deeper questions?

It was at a battlefield called Shiloh that the seeds of my own love of history and archaeology first germinated. On a spring day, a Sunday, April 6th of 1862,

⁶ "The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark," MIT, accessed December 26, 2022, <http://shakespeare.mit.edu/hamlet/hamlet.5.1.html>.

on the banks of the Tennessee River, one of the bloodiest battles on American soil was fought between Union and Confederate forces. The epic battle was called Shiloh, which ironically meant, “place of peace.” Shiloh Church was a small log cabin church located near the edge of the battlefield. The bloody event lasted for two days. In its wake, an estimated 24,000 soldiers lay dead or dying on the fields and woods near a small peach orchard where the trees had just started to bud and blossom. In the heat of the battle, mini balls (lead bullets fired from rifled muskets) whizzed from both sides through the branches, tearing both limb and blossom. These drifted down and settled like snow on the wounded and the dying. It was both a beautiful and graphic analogy to what was happening to the very flesh and bone of the young men who lay on the battlefield – cut off from the land of the living in the springtime of their lives.

Well over a century later I visited the battlefield for the first time with my Boy Scout troop. As I walked across the battlefield between the “Hornet’s Nest” and the “Peach Orchard,” I tried to imagine what it must have been like on that fateful day. I wondered about every rock, tree, stone, and what might be buried under every square inch of sod. Did the ground hold some secret, or “know” something that no one else knew? What secrets and mysteries still lie buried beneath the earth? Was there anything else we could learn about that fateful day?

I saw with my own eyes the “Bloody Pond,” as it was called, where wounded soldiers from both sides dragged themselves to bathe and tend their wounds. In so doing, they tinted the water blood red, like the Nile in book of Exodus when Moses struck it with his staff. Shiloh was

one of the costliest engagements of the Civil War up to that point.

Just days after the battle in 1862, the American writer and poet Herman Melville, famous for his novel *Moby Dick*, visited the ghastly scene. Although not an archaeologist, he penned this brilliant poem, which perhaps summarizes what took place there better than the archaeologist's spade.

Skimming lightly, wheeling still,
The swallows fly low
Over field in clouded days,
The forest-field of Shiloh—
Over the field where April rain
Solaced the parched one stretched in pain
Through the pause of night
That followed the Sunday fight
Around the church of Shiloh—
The church so lone, the log-built one,
That echoed to many a parting groan
And natural prayer
Of dying foeman mingled there—
Foemen at morn, but friends at eve—
Fame or country least their care:

(What like a bullet can undeceive!)

But now they lie low,

While over them the swallows skim

And all is hushed at Shiloh.⁷

Ushering modern poetry into the 20th century, the poet T.S. Eliot penned *The Waste Land* in 1922, yet his words echo the events not only of Shiloh, but also of all wars and the mysterious interplay between life and death.

April is the cruelest month, breeding

Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing

Memory and desire, stirring

Dull roots with spring rain.

Winter kept us warm, covering earth in
forgetful snow, feeding

A little life with dried tubers . . .⁸

The archaeologist excavates with spade and trowel.
Melville and Eliot excavated with their words. As the
Irish poet Seamus Heaney tells us,

Between my finger and my thumb

⁷ "Shiloh: A Requiem," in Herman Melville, *Selected Poems*, Robert Faggen, Editor (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 39.

⁸ T.S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Poems*, Frank Kermode, Editor (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 55.

The squat pen rests.

I'll dig with it.⁹

In his brilliant book, *Landscapes*, Scottish writer Robert Macfarlane reminds us of Emerson's notion that even language itself is fossiliferous and must be excavated and brought to the surface by poets.

'Language is fossil poetry,' wrote Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1844, 'as the limestone of the continent consists of infinite masses of the shells of animalcules, so language is made up of images, or tropes, which now, in their secondary use, have long ceased to remind us of their poetic origin.' Emerson, an essayist, sought to reverse the petrification and restore the 'poetic origin' of words, thereby revealing the originary role of 'nature' in language.¹⁰

Excavating Words

One of the most ironic connections between archaeology and poetry (literature) is with Homer's epic tale -- the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The quest to find evidence for ancient Troy quite literally gave birth to archaeology itself. At the age of seven, Heinrich Schliemann first decided that he wanted to go find the ruins of ancient Troy to prove that the epic tale happened in history. According to Schliemann, his father had given him a book for Christmas which included an illustration of

⁹ "Digging," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed January 5, 2023, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/47555/digging>.

¹⁰ Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 6.

Aeneas fleeing the burning walls of Troy.¹¹ In 1870 at 48 years of age, Schliemann started excavating an ancient site in Turkey, near the Dardanelles, believed to be the ancient site of Troy: the mound of Hissarlik. After years of excavating there, Schliemann also went on to excavate at Mycenae in Greece and claims to have “gazed upon the face of Agamemnon.”¹² After over a century of excavation at Hissarlik and Mycenae, archaeologists are still divided over the significance of the site and its relationship to Homer’s epic poem.¹³

Is there a kernel of truth, or historical basis for Homer’s Trojan War? The short answer is a qualified, yes! In the Late Bronze Age, around 1180 B.C. (when the Trojan war was believed to have taken place), Mycenaean culture and the entire Bronze Age, came to an end.¹⁴ While archaeologists continue to excavate, debate, and publish on ancient Hissarlik (Troy), others continue to excavate meaning from its historic and poetic significance.

¹¹ As told by Eric Cline, in *Three Stones Make a Wall: The Story of Archaeology* (Princeton & Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 26-27.

¹² Leo Deuel, *Memoirs of Heinrich Schliemann: A Documentary Portrait Drawn from His Autobiographical Writings, Letters, and Excavation Reports* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977).

¹³ See, C. Brian Rose, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Troy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ See, C. Brian Rose, *The Archaeology of Greek and Roman Troy*, and Michael Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War* (New York: Facts on File, 1985). Leo Deuel, *Memoirs of Heinrich Schliemann: A Documentary Portrait Drawn from His Autobiographical Writings, Letters, and Excavation Reports* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977).

In World War I, between 1915-1916, a major campaign was waged between Great Britain, France, and Russia against the Ottoman Empire in the Dardanelles, near the ancient site of Hissarlik (Troy). The campaign was known as Gallipoli. As soldiers made their way in ships to the site of the conflict, those who were educated in Homer deeply felt the irony. It was in those same waters that, according to Homer, Greek ships sailed and landed on the shores to wage war against the Trojans. The Gallipoli campaign created devastating losses for both sides, but the Ottoman Empire in Turkey eventually gained the upper hand. One of the commanders of the Ottomans during the campaign was Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who eventually rose to become the founding father of the modern republic of Turkey. After the battle of Gallipoli, Atatürk is rumored to have stated, “Hector, your death has been avenged.”¹⁵

Homer’s words continue to reverberate well into our own day.

Terra Incognita: Excavating the Mysteries of the Self

What other mysteries lie beneath our feet? Above our heads? Within ourselves? In his brilliantly creative and slightly cheeky book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, Walker Percy cites the German philosopher Nietzsche.

We are unknown, we knowers to ourselves . . .
Of necessity we remain strangers to
ourselves, we understand ourselves not, in
our selves we are bound to be mistaken, for
each of us holds good to all eternity the motto,

¹⁵ Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War*, 34-35.

'Each is the farthest away from himself' – as far as ourselves are concerned we are not knowers.¹⁶

Percy himself goes on to ask the question,

Why is it possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab Nebula in Taurus, which is 6,000 light-years away, than you presently know about yourself, even though you've been with yourself all your life?¹⁷

Where does one turn to probe and dig into the mysteries of the self? In the 4th Century A.D., Saint Augustine pondered the same questions, and discovered in his seminal work, *Confessions of Saint Augustine*, that God alone can illuminate the mysteries of the self.

"For Augustine," writes Philosopher James K.A. Smith,

psychology is cartography: to understand oneself is a matter of mapping our penchant to look for love in all the wrong places. The range of our exterior wandering is mirrored by the interior expanse of the soul. 'A human being as such is a huge abyss,' he would later muse to his God. 'You know the number of hairs on his head, Master, and in you there's no subtraction from that number; but it's

¹⁶ As quoted by Walker Percy, in *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Picador, 1983), introduction.

¹⁷ Ibid. 1.

easier to count his hairs than his moods or the workings of his heart.¹⁸

Throughout his *Confessions*, Augustine affirms the Psalmist in Psalm 139, that “indeed the darkness shall not hide from You [God], But the night shines as the day; the darkness and the light are both alike to You.”¹⁹

Like Heinrich Schliemann, we are all on our own quest to excavate and find meaning from things that lie buried in the dark. Both the archaeologist and the poet seek *knowledge*. What *kind* of knowledge can and will be debated. French Thomist philosopher Jacques Maritain perhaps articulates better than most what kind of knowledge poetry can and does bring us. He writes,

Poetic knowledge is as natural to the spirit of man as the return of the bird to his nest; and it is the universe which, together with the spirit, makes its way back to the mysterious nest of the soul. For the content of Poetic intuition is both the reality of the things of the world and the subjectivity of the Poet, both obscurely conveyed through an intentional or spiritualized emotion. The soul is known in the experience of the world and the world is known in the experience of the soul, through a knowledge which does not know itself.²⁰

¹⁸ James K.A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2019), 11.

¹⁹ Psalm 139, NKJV.

²⁰ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 124.

Archaeologists excavate human artifacts and attempt to bring light to the past. Poets excavate and dig with their words, prose, rhyme, and syntax. Both disciplines, however, are mere approximations - imperfect in their quest to uncover the mysteries they seek to solve. The quest is real indeed, and ongoing - a genuine struggle to articulate perfectly. In that sense, like Hamlet, we are all archaeologists and poets. Perhaps this is what T.S. Eliot had in mind when he wrote the following lines in "East Coker":

And so each venture
Is a new beginning, a raid on the inarticulate
With shabby equipment always deteriorating
In the general mess of imprecision of feeling,
Undisciplined squads of emotion. And what
there is to
conquer
By strength and submission, but has already
been discovered
Once or twice, or several times, by men whom
one cannot
hope
To emulate – but there is no competition –
There is only the fight to recover what has
been lost
And found and lost again; and now under

conditions

That seem unpropitious. But perhaps neither
gain nor loss.

For us, there is only the trying. The rest is not
our business.²¹

There is always more to explore and write. New discoveries invite further reflection, and each generation must become archaeologists as it were, equipped only with the “shabby equipment” of words to go out and excavate mysteries and beauties which lie buried beneath earth and flesh.

²¹ T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt Books, 1973), 30-31.

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