

The dignity of the fragment

Web based excavation reports between database and narrative

for the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology

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2/22/2023

Archaeological publishing rests on two basic pillars: printed reports and digital databases. The correlation between the two tends to be rather feeble: the database may be linked from a narrative in PDF format, but it is not really integrated in a unified whole. We propose to use the website as an epistemic system that allows for just such integration.

We will first discuss, as a theoretical model, the notion of digital discourse. It refers to the way in which multiple planes are structurally interlaced and integrated, including both narrative and data. A website is the ideal formal channel in this regard: it embodies the functions that are distinctive of critical thought, where parallel and alternative threads are brought to bear on a given argument. These threads are structured, in a website, as planes that are conceived concurrently by the author(s) and must be so studied by the reader(s). And archaeology is the ideal test case for implementing this vision.

We will then present a concrete implementation of the system as it applies to the excavations at Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh. The digital record consists of a cluster of websites which interact or "discourse" with each other according to the inter-planar model described. Narrative and databases are tightly interlaced, allowing for a smooth interconnection between grammar and hermeneutics: the dignity of the fragment rests on the dual aspect of retaining its individuality while at the same time being seen as part of a meaningful whole. Part of the system relates to quantification and statistics: in the case of ceramics, some 320,000 items have been fully analyzed (whole vessels and sherds), and every single item retains its full identity including the details of its stratigraphic context and typology while serving at the same time as a tessera in the large mosaic of the statistical universe.