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The Andakatu Project: A New Praxis in Archaeology

By Luiz Oosterbeek Sun, Feb 27, 2011



Heritage education, although still often set aside, has assumed an increasing role, regardless of the different realities in terms of geography and socio-cultural frames. In spite of this, projects that effectively engage in awareness and socialization of scientific knowledge are still scarce. The Andakatu Project of the Museum of Prehistoric Art of Mação (Portugal) is aimed at all publics and presents a program, activities and contents arising from multiple archaeological research programs conducted at the Museum and its partners (universities and research centers, namely). Moreover, the objective of belonging to the local community is constant and, for this, there is an attempt to convey ideas of identification with the cultural and environmental heritage, its conservation and protection. Archaeology being the starting point, it is intertwined with various scientific and artistic elements in order to, through communication based on interactive experimentation, encourage questioning, learning and citizenship.

Present Messages from the Past

Although Archaeology is developing and expanding more and more its range of interests and knowledge, its approach to the past remains constant and particular. In this sense, even though its interest builds from the human sciences, it focuses on natural and earth sciences as well, without knowledge segmentation or isolation. This is substantiated by the fact that Archaeology attempts to build an understanding of past human behaviour as cultural adaptations interacting with the environment (Binford 1992). Concomitantly, it is paradoxical in the sense that it stresses the diversity of cultural behaviour strategies, but also the unity and interaction among them since, in their essence, they were driven by natural needs common to all mankind all over the planet.

When studying Prehistory, it becomes clear that humans developed various landscape management strategies under different time and space constraints but most of the time living in a sort of harmony and balance with their environment, eventually disrupted by climatic or environmental changes. Sadly, the present world condition is one of enormous problems and even possible catastrophic consequences; such unbalance is due, among other causes, to the ecological systemic impact of our actions, the enormous geographical expansion of our species throughout planet Earth and, above all, the lack of integration of the landscape management policies (Oosterbeek & Scheunemann 2010). Even more worrying is the fact that we are loosing consciousness of our dependence upon the environment (Oosterbeek 2010b).

Currently, archaeological practice combines a great variety of complex technologies with a growing involvement of untrained people - largely children and youngsters - attracted by the opportunity to participate in some stages of research (survey or excavation) where, to a certain extent, they can be part of the process of knowledge growth. In doing so, Archaeology emerges at the crossroads of knowledge, contributing to the enhancement of our youth in understanding cultural diversity (Bastos 2007).

With this in mind, in our opinion there is a set of "present messages from the past" that can be part of non-formal scientific and cultural education and passed on to the community, especially children and youth:

- Awareness that knowledge is built through a combination of rigorous disciplines, methods and dialogue involving often-contradictory points of view;
- The necessity of a better understanding of the social and cultural differences of the present world and stimulation of children and youth to the notion of intercultural and mutual understanding;
- Instilling awareness and concern for the sustainable exploitation of natural resources; and

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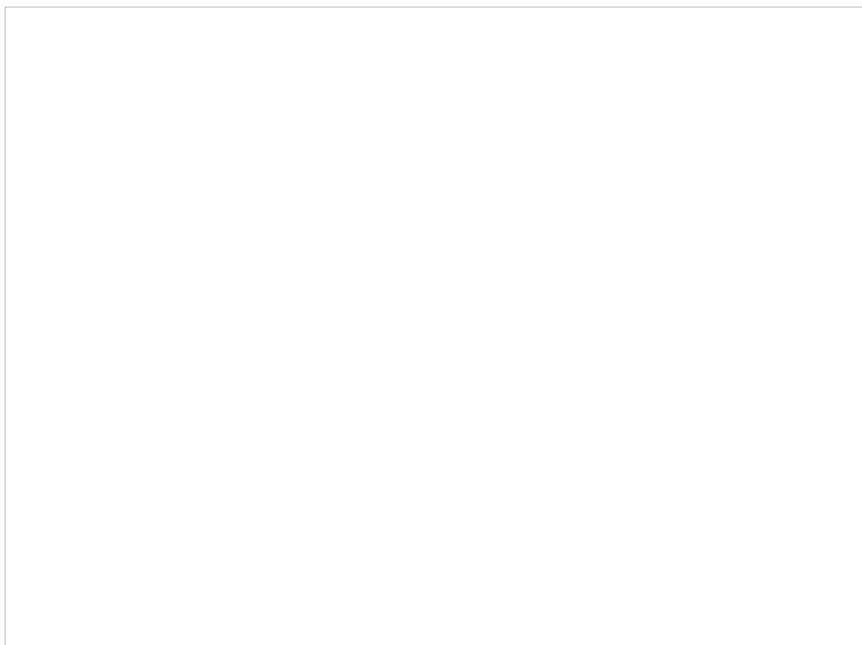
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- The need to reflect and develop a critical knowledge about the unnatural climatic changes and motivating the struggle against them.

Within the Andakatu project we developed didactical tools, strongly grounded on experimentation, capable of enhancing the knowledge of the diversities and complementarities of cultural adaptations in Prehistory, effectively transmitting the aforementioned concepts. The core concern of such an educational program is not Prehistory alone as in other project (e.g. Sampaio & Aubry 2008 a, b), but mainly to render understandable and usable the concepts of time, space and causality, considered crucial for any humans to survive. In this sense, the didactics of archaeology becomes an instructional program on the relevance of technology and all its related processes, namely knowledge, environmental awareness and economics.



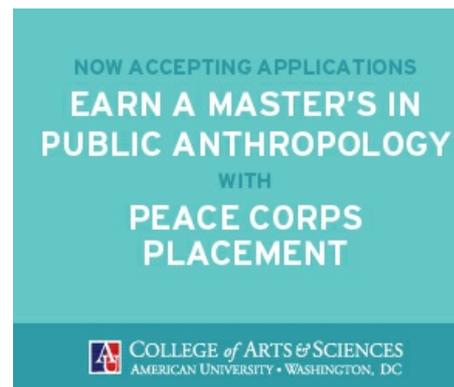
A didactic activity at the CPH (Prehistory Research Centre of IPT).

The Prehistoric Art Museum and the Andakatu Project

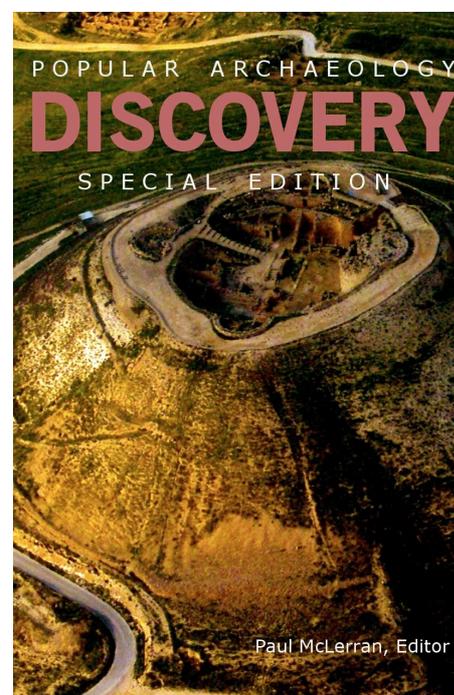
The Museum of Prehistoric Art of Mação (Central Portugal) acts in different areas, from research to heritage management, but its main role is to be a space of meeting, reflection and the building of critical knowledge and concepts (Oosterbeek, 2009, 2010a). The Museum is focused on the meaning of human interaction with the landscape, but also its transformation throughout Prehistory, mostly through the transition from the last hunter-gatherers to the first farmers' communities, their dwellings, burials and art. With Prehistoric Art as its main theme, practical and creative education is a major component of all activities, having in mind that a synaesthetic stimulation is the best way to educate and pass on a message (Gonçalves *et al.* 2002).

Within this context, the educational services of the Museum of Prehistoric Art developed a didactic project where a character named Andakatu leads children, youth and adults into the path of human evolution, while transmitting the aforementioned messages. The goals are largely achieved through experimentation, both performed by the character and by children and youth. It also includes fieldwork and laboratory activities involving the participants in a "learn by doing" process with a predominant performing attitude, favoring a bridge between culture, science, technology and arts.

Dressed in a Paleolithic hunter disguise or as a Neolithic farmer, Andakatu's activities and communication are in direct relation with the research on the transformation of landscape, technology and rock art, in the transition from hunting-gathering-fishing to agro-pastoralist communities, also considering the social changes and the sustainability of environmental resources. These activities are a practical extension of a dialogue with the museum visitors, which is dynamic and contextualized within the interpretations of what might have been the experienced reality of human communities throughout Prehistory; additionally, it attempts to be an instrument of civic education (Oosterbeek *et al.*, 2007).



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Activities: Experimentation and Dissemination

The workshops made by Andakatu are based on direct experiences, but the technological experimentation with various materials assumes a central role in the development of a deeper understanding of the thematic transmitted (Cura *et al.*, 2008). These experiences, however, are not only entertaining but also structured in direct connection with the archaeological experimentation, carried out under the research projects that the Museum develops with its partners, mainly the Polytechnic Institute of Tomar and the Earth and Memory Institute. Thus, the heritage education doesn't separate theory from practice, or research from didactics, and doesn't risk being reduced to a simplistic popularization of the research results. Indeed, visitors are aware that what they perform is in its essence "the same" as what scholars do, and this has proved to be a major tool to attract people, namely youth, into science. There is an obvious constant concern to differentiate between Experimental Archaeology and activities of experimentation (Reynolds, 1999; García Munúa, 2008). However, it is precisely the fact that the Andakatu Project is developed in direct articulation with the archaeological research that ensures a proper transmission of scientific knowledge. Moreover, it is an assurance of its continuity, since scientific knowledge hardly finds a broad sense if it is only understood and supported by its skilled professionals (García Munúa, 2008). In current society, the "way of doing" awareness is being lost, and despite the fact that people appreciate the results of science and technology while using their end products, they hardly understand the complexity involved in their production. Andakatu is about learning the processes, the complexity and the usefulness of science and technology, and of how these and the understanding of past processes and contexts have to be tackled together.

In this sense, the project is a group of various experiments that bear a direct link with some major disciplines of Archaeology, integrating museum research projects, namely lithic technology, rock art, ceramics, zooarchaeology, geoarchaeology, and related disciplines such as Ethnography and Anthropology. The practical link between the project and the research is well defined in the activities of creation and later modification of artifacts and representation. From different raw materials (rock, wood, clay, bone, vegetables, various pigments), Andakatu creates innumerable experiments resulting in the elaboration of usable artifacts (lithic utensils as sickles, bone implements as arrow points, various vessels and inks) and their practical use (in paintings, cooking, using of bows and arrow) within safe and responsible conditions. A recent experiment was conducted with a "prehistoric cooking" event. This was not only a discussion on possible recipes based on known food resources, but an interaction with the various material culture tools involved in the process, from tool making and cultivation to crops and hunting. Everything that Andakatu uses, (for example, glues), is made of natural resources that existed in Prehistory.

The public follows the entire technological process from the choice of the best materials for specific tasks, to their elaboration, bearing in mind the scientific data, in a "learn by doing" way. Furthermore, the reciprocity is evident in the sense that there exists a constant questioning and acquisition of data from both the public and the specialists in a win-win situation.

Once again, the aim is to engage visitors of all ages, without specific training in Archaeology, in the problems of scientific research in order to create a link of reciprocity. This is the main reason why we do not only disclose the final results, but the questions and methods at our disposal to search for answers (and questions), assuming that in Prehistory, as in any other discipline, communication with the general public is not separable from the promotion of a critical spirit and interrogative reflection.

The project also takes place outside the physical space of the Museum, mainly in primary and high schools. In these workshops, as well as in the "Andakatu space" in the Museum, direct experiences are provided that "summarize" experimental research, including reproductions that are not related with research programs, illustrating "our" evolution, thus conveying the present messages from the past.



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Final Remarks

We can maintain with some certainty that the project has had positive results and grows side by side with the Museum of Prehistoric Art of Mação. The next step is to verify this efficiency using an evaluation plan consisting of questionnaires and interviews with the users and their subsequent qualitative and quantitative processing. As our aim is focused on knowledge and conceptual building, such evaluation will require monitoring some participants for at least some months, and this has not been done yet.

Since 2007 the Andakatu project has involved thousands of children, youth and adults and it continues to grow. Although it collaborates mainly with schools, it must be stressed that there are also activities with various national and international institutions (museums, interpretation centers, associations, municipalities, private commercial entities) (Cura *et al.*, 2011 in press).

Heritage education at the Museum of Mação is successful, both in terms of requests and of efficiency in the transmission of messages and contents. We believe this is due to the care taken in its preparation, the existence of a permanent link between the program and the specific needs of its users, mainly due to the fact that in the didactic team researchers play a core role (in presentations, execution and preparation of contents). This prevents over-simplifying the complexity of processes, which become understandable to people because of the practical, experimental, approach.

World wide web links:

Blog: www.arqueologiaexperimental.blogspot.com

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/user/Andakatu>

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