Keywords: archaeology, photography, conservation, glass-plates, camera, negatives, archive, ideology, digitization.

Abstract: This short article is intended to introduce the reader to the photographic archive of The Vasile Pârvan Institute of Archaeology in Bucharest. The parallel histories of early archaeology and early photography in Romania are described, with the emphasis on the link between them. The structure and content of the archive, along with some of its oldest items, are discussed, as are conservation problems and ongoing work on digitization of some of the most important images. The social meanings of the archive, and of some of the photographs within it, are also considered.

Rezumat: Institutul de Arheologie "Vasile Pârvan" din București deține una dintre cele mai importante arhive fotografice de arheologie din sud-estul Europei. Articolul de față își propune să prezinte structura acestei arhive precum și câteva dintre fotografile cele mai vechi studiate până în prezent. Istoria dezvoltării arheologiei românești, precum și a fotografiei sunt prezentate pe scurt, urmărindu-se și accentuându-se traseul lor sincron. Articolul deschide de asemenea discuția privind rolul arhivei, rolul ei de utilizare, rolul ei în ierarhizarea breslei, rolul în care este controlată și diseminată informația.

Introduction

In 1839 François Arago, a member of the Académie des Sciences, introduced the world to the new invention, the daguerreotype. In his presentation he stressed the significance of the discovery to art and science in general, but also specifically highlighted its usefulness for archaeology:

“To copy the millions of hieroglyphics which cover even the exterior of the great monuments of Thebes, Memphis, Karnak, and others would require decades of time and legions of draughtsmen. By daguerreotype one person would suffice to accomplish this immense work successfully. Equip the Egyptian Institute with two or three of Daguerre's apparatus, and before long innumerable hieroglyphics as they are in reality will replace those which now are invented or drawn by approximation.”

One of the first textbooks (1924) on photographic practice in archeology was written by George Andrew Reisner, an American archaeologist, best known for excavations at the Giza necropolis. He pointed out that the field photography is a fundamental element in the process of archaeological research. Not coincidentally his textbook chapter on the “Limitations of Photography” notes: “The main use of photography is to record the facts revealed by mechanical excavation and correctly emphasized by a skilled archaeologist”.

Moving forward from these early observations on the role of photography in archaeology and its use in the process of documenting archaeological research, present-day American archaeologist Michael Shanks believes that there are some similarities between photography and archaeology, similarities that allow us to better understand the usefulness of photography in archaeology, how and why the photographs were made, how the photographic archives were built, how they influenced archaeological knowledge and how they helped create hierarchies, whether social, between archaeologists or institutions, or administrative and cultural between archaeological sites:

Conservation work in the archive is currently supported through a grant from the Endangered Archives Programme of the British Library (project reference EAP816 “Selective digitization and preservation of the photographic archive of The Vasile Pârvan Institute of Archaeology, Bucharest, Romania”).

A preliminary version of this text was delivered also as a paper in May 2014 at the International Congress of Anthropology and Photography, at the British Museum, London.

Dominiique François Jean Arago (1786-1853) was a French mathematician, physicist and astronomer.

Bohrer 2011, p. 28.

Vandermeulen 2014, p. 33.

Michael Shanks is one of the key authors when it comes to understanding the relationship between archaeology and photography. For more see Shanks 1997a; Shanks 1997b; Shanks, Svabo 2013. Important and interesting ideas are on his website as well – www.mshanks.com.


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