The Role of the Conservator on an Archaeological Excavation

Arkeolojik Kazıda Konservatörun Rolü

Catherine Sease

Figure 1: Providing support to an Achaemenid terra cotta sarcophagus prior to lifting, Hacnebe, Turkey.

Resim 1: Kaldirma işlemi öncesinde pişmiş toprak Aksaemenid lahitine desteğ yapılmı. Hacnebe, Türkiye.

Credit: Tania Colas

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The conservation of archaeological materials must be regarded as an integral part of the archaeological process. It is a subspecialty of the discipline with its own practitioners, methodologies, and procedures. Archaeological conservation itself is divided into two broad categories: artifact conservation and monument/site conservation. Today, these are separate specialties; conservators trained in the treatment of artifacts are not trained in the treatment of monuments or sites and vice versa. Depending on the nature of a site’s needs, conservators in both specialties may be needed for a project. For the purpose of this guide, the terms artifact and archaeological materials are used in their broadest sense to include all constructs related to human activity: artifacts, buildings, monuments, and sites.

Many excavations in Turkey and elsewhere do not include conservators on their excavation teams. This may be due in part to a lack of financial support, but another factor is the lack of understanding of the important role the conservator plays on an excavation.

In the beginning stages, a conservator can help establish the conservation needs and priorities of the project. Through discussion and planning, a conservator can help the archaeologist determine, and later implement, policies and procedures for the safe recovery, recording, and processing of all archaeological materials. Later, once initial stability has been achieved, the conservator can take steps to that subsequent handling, studying, and storage do not upset that stability. On site, the conservator can assume much of the responsibility for the daily handling of archaeological materials, taking the burden of these activities from the excavation director.

Figure 2: Mending, filling and inpainting archaeological ceramics.
An important aspect of on-site conservation is ensuring the safe recovery of artifacts from the ground and packaging them for transfer to the field laboratory. The conservator cannot be involved in the removal of all artifacts on the excavation; fortunately, for most artifacts, lifting is a straightforward process. There are times, however, when it is better for the conservator to do the lifting, for example, when artifacts are too fragile to be picked up without additional support. An experienced field conservator has a repertoire of lifting techniques suitable for a variety of different material types and situations.

Probably the most important function of the conservator is stabilization, to slow down and arrest the deterioration of archaeological materials that occur when they are excavated. At the time of exposure, most materials are more vulnerable to deterioration than at any time in their existence. As the impact of excavation can be devastating due to changes in the environment, irreversible damage can be avoided with appropriate initial care. On-site conservation must begin at the moment of exposure. Stabilization can take place either while the material is still in the ground or later, in the field laboratory. Such treatment can include consolidation, the arrest of corrosion on metals, and the removal of water-soluble salts. It might also involve the slow, controlled drying of damp or waterlogged organic materials.

Although it can be the first step in a stabilization treatment, cleaning is undertaken on its own to enable the processing, study, and research of artifacts to proceed. Cleaning, as a form of micro-extraction, enables information to be retrieved from artifacts as well as to enable them to be cataloged, photographed, drawn, and studied.

The field conservator can be a valuable technical resource for the excavation team. Through the technical examination of archaeological materials, conservators can provide information that might be important for the interpretation of the artifacts and the site. This work usually involves close visual examination, cleaning, and performing relatively simple analytical tests, all of which are frequently carried out as part of treatment. These techniques, along with a familiarity and understanding of materials, enable conservators to identify and characterize archaeological materials. Conservators can also clarify information about how artifacts were made, assembled, and utilized.

Conservators also undertake a variety of other tasks, including the reassembly of broken artifacts. While not always a part of on-site conservation, reassembly and other forms of restoration are sometimes necessary for the study and recording of artifacts. On some sites, a conservator’s technical skills are called upon to make impressions or casts of artifacts, for example, of cylinder and stamp seals or coins.

Conservation treatment alone is not enough to ensure the long-term preservation of artifacts. Artifacts may remain in on-site storage facilities for some time, exposed to adverse environmental conditions, before going to a museum, where there may be no environmental controls. Preventive techniques can play a significant role in protecting archaeological materials. The emphasis of preventive conservation is to control metal objelerindeki koroziyonu durduruma ve suda çözülebilen tuzların giderilmesini içerir. Öte yandan, nemli veya sava doymuş organik malzemelerin kontrollü olarak kurutulması da kapsayabilir.

Temizlik stabilization işlemenin ilk basamağı olabileceğini gibi, objenin incelemesi, çalışılması ve araştırılması mümkin kılınmak üzere teknik bir başına da uygulanabilir. Bu işlem bir mikro-kazı biçimine olup, buluntulardan bilgi edinilmesini, kalemlerimizini hazırlama, fotoğrafların çekilip, çizimin yapıp çalışılması sağlar.


Konservatörler, kalmış olan objelerin yени bir görüntüleme de içerir daha pek çok işlemenin sorumluları. Her zaman arazide konservasyonun bir bölümü olmaksızın birlikte, birleştirilmiş ve diğer restoreasyon biçimlerine objenin çalışması ve belgelenebilmesi için gerek chuyabılır. Bazı kazılarda, konservatörün teknik becerisi objelerin kalınlarını veya izlerinin alınmasını yardımcı olur, silindir ve bazı múltürlüler ile sikikler bu işlemle öneği gösterebilir.

Buluntuların uzun vadede korunması için konservasyon işlemenin tek başına yetmedi. Buluntular müzeye gönderilmenden önce bir süre kazi deposunda kalabilir ve depo koşullarının kontrolü mümkün olmadıği için diğer ortam özelliklerinden korunması bundan dolayı zor olabilir. Bu nedenle, arazideki önlemler coruma uygula-
the environment in which artifacts are housed. Thus the preventive effort in the field almost always revolves around the packing and storage of artifacts. The judicious use of packing materials and techniques to a greater or lesser extent can offset the effects of uncontrolled environmental conditions.

Preventive techniques are used to protect monuments and sites from deterioration due to exposure, not only after excavation is concluded but also between excavation seasons, when backfilling areas of a site or other measures might be required. The issues involved in site protection are complex, as monuments and sites cannot be removed and packaged in the way small artifacts can. Many factors have an impact on treatment options, as discussed in Field Notes Number 10, *Archaeological Site Protection in Turkey.*

The best long-term preservation for all archaeological materials is achieved when conservation plays an integral role in the excavation process from the initial planning stages of a project through post-excavation analysis, publication, storage of the finds, and presentation of the site. At all stages, the conservator should be regarded as just as important a member of the excavation team as all other specialists. ●

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Figure 4: Cleaning ceramics from the Uluburun shipwreck. Institute of Nautical Archaeology, Bodrum, Turkey.

Resim 4: Uluburun Batığında ele geçen seramik kapların temizlenmesi, Sualtı Arkeoloji Enstitüsü, Bodrum, Türkiye.

Credit © Institute of Nautical Archaeology /Sualtı Arkeoloji Enstitüsü

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