

# Archaeologia Magistra Vitae?

## Digging Ancient Artifacts: A Metaphor for Knowledge

Giampiero Bevagna

---

### Abstract

Finding a path, connecting the dots, and recognizing patterns in the complex maze of information is our job as affective scholars and teachers. Providing the right tools to navigate and understand all this information is the key to gaining knowledge. Using archaeology as a metaphor, the analysis of archaeological findings from digs are not only valued per se, but are also used as a window into the world they came from. Just like in any modern scholarly discipline, only logical reasoning based on data retrieved through rigorous research can be assumed true gain. Archaeology might not bring one to the ultimate “truth”, but we always learn something about ourselves as people and as a part of a long trail of human lives. Setting up an archaeology program abroad helps students gain a more in-depth understanding of the reality of the territory.

**Keywords:** archaeology, *sapientia*, study abroad programs, classical studies

---

We live in a world where oversimplification is valued as an advantage; this is the world of the Internet. Gaining knowledge is seemingly easy: you “Google it” and whatever you need to know is there “at the click of a mouse”. But is that really the case? Of course not.

The job of intellectuals, scholars, and teachers is to find a path in a labyrinth, discern a pattern in the chaos, and ultimately turn the complex into the easy in order to make it comprehensible for the masses.

Yet, chaos and complexity do exist, and whether we like it or not, we must learn to cope with them. Denying this is just denying reality. The real world is intricate, chaotic, complex and complicated.

What should good teachers do, then? In my opinion, they should

make their students aware of the real world and provide them with the right tools in the tough challenge of understanding it and facing its difficulties.

All this may sound like a tremendous effort. As a matter of fact, it is. But teachers should also explain what their students will gain: knowledge, or *sapientia* – if I may use this word.

At this point, I know that I owe an apology: I am a classicist, and my brain has been trained in the “old classical” way. Among my models I still – stubbornly – mention Sophocles, Plato, Cicero, Horace, Lucretius, and the like.

It is from this “classical” approach that I cooperate with a team of great archaeologists. Our task (a difficult one, I must admit) is to organize and manage an archaeological field-school that The Umbra Institute created and has been offering for four years now.

Here I must ask my readers for a little patience. They will soon find the connection between the opening lines in this article and an archaeology summer course. But I don’t have much space and I don’t want to bore anyone by explaining in detail what an archaeological project implies. So, I must oversimplify!

Archaeology is no longer about revealing hidden treasures and secret civilizations. It was something like that a century or more ago: in the 1700s and early 1800s nobody was really an “archaeologist” in the current sense of the word but rather an adventurer seeking beautiful or valuable artifacts to be sold in the profitable market of antiquities. Exceptions can be named, but they were extremely rare in those days. Only in time, gradually (with ups and downs, and many tries), a new vision and a different approach to the discipline of archaeology emerged. It was then that the earliest true archaeologists started to define the “right” methods and theories of archaeological research. They did so with the help of and in comparison to other scientific disciplines that were already well advanced (geology and anthropology, for instance).

What appeared clear to these first scholars was that only a well-defined, scientifically-organized, and meticulous method was capable of

yielding results that could be considered valid. Just like in any other modern scholarly discipline, only logical reasoning based on data retrieved through rigorous research can be assumed a true gain.

Archaeology has to do with the material remains and traces of human activities. Whatever object is found during an archaeological excavation, it is valued not only *per se*, but moreover for its being a potential window into the world it comes from. A pot, a sword, a wall, a tomb, a temple, and so on – small or big, well preserved or not, valuable or coarse – are documents. As such, they represent small pieces in the vast puzzle that is history.

We need to remember two things though. First, whatever section or aspect of any past society we are investigating, the whole picture – in its full entirety – is lost forever. We will never retrieve all the pieces of the puzzle. Some are just destroyed and lost forever. Second, no matter how close we are to putting together all the pieces, there is no way to see, think, or feel in the exact same way people did in the past (and that is valid for the recent past, too).

So ... why bother with archaeology? Isn't it just frustrating? It might be, sometimes. But just like in many other fields of knowledge, the research is valuable in itself, and even if we don't arrive at the ultimate "truth", we always learn something about ourselves as people, about ourselves as part of a long trail of human lives.

This is part of the fascination that archaeology still holds over us. In the end, archaeology is about people, and not about objects. We work with material things, but we want to search for, look at, and talk to the people who "are beyond those objects".

"Findings" is the easy term we sometimes use to label the archaeological material found in a dig. Yet, this word makes it seem just a casual discovery. This is not true. Any serious archaeological campaign implies background research that prepares and forms a basis for the following steps, which is just as meticulous and scrupulous as the actual excavation process.

But what about all that comes after the digging? This is where the *real*

study starts! The actual work is processing every single piece of information the excavation has produced, and, most importantly, interpreting that data against scientific analysis and in light of logically-reasoned hypotheses.

Well, here we are: back to the complexity and chaotic/labyrinthine reality that all humans live in, contemporary societies as well as ancient ones. Someone may say that our modern world is more complex (complicated, if you will), and rightly so. But this is not to say that, for example, the Roman Empire was an easy and straightforward world. Each period, each human community, each culture is “difficult” to understand. The archaeological field-school aspires to be – are we perhaps a little ambitious? – a place where students learn to be aware of such complexity. This is why we tried to build a program as complete as possible (of course, considering the amount of time a summer program can last).

One of the first issues is that we wanted the program to be open to any student who was willing to approach this field (basically, we want it to be a no-prerequisites course); so, we have to talk to students with different degrees of knowledge in the field, including absolute beginners. That means we have to offer them essential background information and “training” in order to enjoy the learning process.

Another fundamental issue is the duality of such a program: including both theoretical and practical components. This is a big challenge. Let’s be more specific on this matter.

Our project deals with the remains of a Roman structure on the Umbrian shores of the tiny Lake Chiusi. (More precisely: in the vicinity of Gioiella in the “Comune” of Castiglione del Lago.) The area sits within the territory that was, in antiquity, part of the “state” of the once powerful Etruscan city of Chiusi, whose control stretched as far as the western shores of the much bigger Lake Trasimeno. “Our” site, which is situated on a hill overlooking Lake Chiusi, comprises a large villa complex spread out over at least three terraces. The 2017 campaign focused on two areas: the central terrace, where a series of features dating from various times were uncovered (including a flight of steps connected with some vaulted rooms), and part of a bath complex on a lower level. All in all, the site looks very

promising from an archaeological point of view. As a matter of fact, it can be considered the only recognizable Roman structure to be scientifically investigated in the whole area. The territory of Chiusi has always been of interest to archaeologists for its Etruscan monuments, above all the beautiful painted tombs. For centuries, amateurs and scholars alike have been looking for the so-called “Tomb of Porsenna”, a myth that still attracts followers. Hardly anyone, however, has cared for post-Etruscan material. As a consequence, very little is known today about Roman *Clusium*.

This is why the Gioiella Villa is not just another Roman villa; the research we started intends to broaden the area of investigation and use any possible tool from different fields to shed light on the reality of this region under Roman rule. The scope is wide, and the plan implies work over many years to come. We don't need a few more artifacts from a Roman building *per se*. What we want to understand is how – and why – the inhabitants of this place in Roman times exploited and changed the territory they inhabited. Using labels for disciplines (labels that sometimes have a restricted and somewhat caging definition), we can say that it is not just archaeology at stake here, but so are history, anthropology, and geology, etc.

Here we go again: complexity. Scholars have to analyze a multi-layered, multi-faceted reality, and they have to do it using many different research tools.

As previously said, digging is just one part of the whole program (certainly the most physically trying!). Students also need to learn the fundamentals of many other disciplines, and see the big variety of approaches that modern archaeology requires. The spectrum is so ample that each student might find her/his own field of interest in the broader quest for knowledge.

What were the challenges in launching such a program? It all depends on what sort of teaching structure one wants to create. We opted for a holistic approach. As mentioned above, we wanted our students to gain a whole understanding of the reality of the territory we are investigating together. That means that students need to know about the history of the place, before and after Roman times; they need to know about the geolo-

gy of the territory and how this affects the local economy and society; but they also need to know about the techniques of archaeological research before, during, and after the excavation itself. Above all, students must know the way to combine all these fields and gain knowledge from all of them. Hence, the duality of this program, joining theoretical and practical components, as I said above.

Is this too much to do in six weeks? First of all, it depends on our ability (as instructors) to communicate with students in the right way. What I think is fundamental here is to make students know and understand that it is a matter of cooperation: it cannot just be the funneling of information from above, nor the simple passive fulfillment of duties on the students' part. A good program must create a common ground for both teachers and students where each is doing her/his own part. That is why it is vital to have the students feel strongly that they can only gain from such an effort; and that is *their* gain, for them to treasure forever. No such program should ever start (nor would it have any positive results) if it did not state very clearly from the beginning this sort of "contract" between faculty and students. The latter must be assured that their efforts will pay off.

This is probably one (maybe the biggest?) difficulty for our students. Sometimes they do not see the results right away; it takes time for them to cash in. Nor should this come as a surprise; we all know that this is true of many other disciplines. Once the students have the necessary background, they can fully and deeply appreciate the importance and the beauty of what they do. One thing is the fleeting thrill of taking some object from the ground that has been buried there for centuries; it is another thing is to fully understand the meaning of that object, appreciate its value as a testimony of its period and as a witness of the lives of the people who made and used it, thus evaluating its importance as a document of a society and civilization that disappeared a long time ago.

If we can make a young student see the result of her/his efforts and feel the joy of an intellectual discovery, our program has served its purpose as a little victory over the idea that knowledge is just a click away.

Anyone can dig (unfortunately many in Italy still do it illegally), but only the prepared ones can do it in the right way and can intellectually cash in on their hard work. This is not just windfall gain; this is a gain that lasts forever, that can be shared with the others. In one word, this is *sapientia*.