

# *Grounding the Past: The Praxis of Participatory Archaeology in the Mixteca Alta, Oaxaca, Mexico*

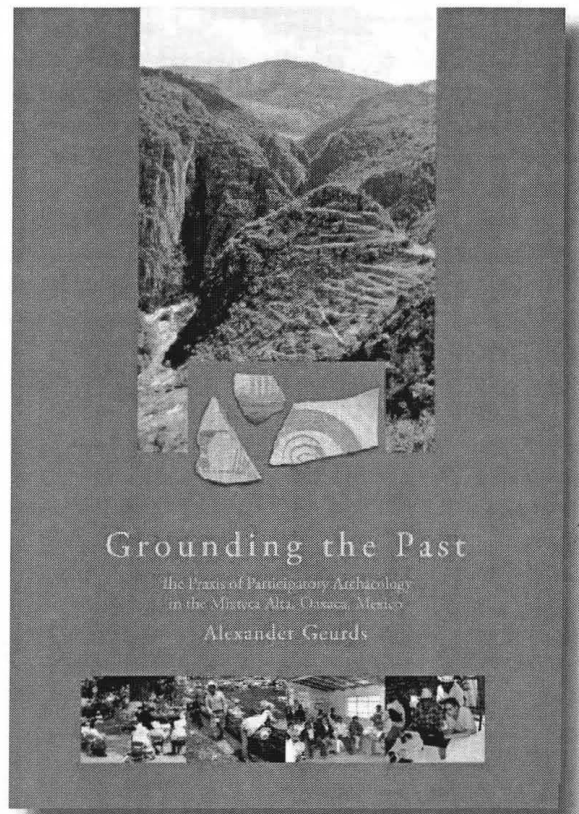
by Alexander Geurds

CNWS Publications Volume 150, Leiden University, Leiden, NL. 367 pp., illus. ISBN 978-90-5789-150-2. € 59 (euro). 2007.

In *Grounding the Past*, Alexander Geurds examines the development of his archaeological research project in the Mixteca area, in today's Oaxaca state, from 2000 to 2004. Geurds discusses the implementation of participatory archaeology in settings of descendent communities by conducting surveying and mapping activities in collaboration with people from Santiago Tilantongo and Santiago Apoala. In his book, Geurds positions himself as a foreign researcher using reflective narrative to question identity and power dynamics of archaeological practice regarding knowledge production in the field. Thus, reading this book is a must for archaeologists interested in applying new methodologies such as the ones based on a participatory archaeology approach to work with local communities. It should also be of interest for a Mesoamerican archaeology reader, especially considering the particularities of the Mixteca in a Latin American social context, where examples of this kind of research are still few.

Oaxaca is used in archaeology for referring to the subregions of the Mixteca Alta, Baja and Costa; the Oaxaca Valley; and the Cuicatlán Cañada. Specifically within the Mixteca Alta, Geurds' research developed in two areas. At Monte Negro, in Tilantongo, it focused on the state of conservation for managing the site. On the basis of the architectural layout of one of the earliest dates from sites featuring monumental architecture, the author argues that the extensive architectural diversity is much more complex in shape and functionality and that the social position of rulership would relate to the sacredness of the landscape at least during the Late Formative occupation. At the Apoala Valley, registration and description of archaeological sites was oriented towards the definition of site boundaries and regional relationships in order to update the state-wide database. The research contributed to the protection, preservation, and conservation of the sites, taking into consideration the substantial flow of tourism to this area and also providing information about the cultural landscapes as well as contemporary agricultural activities in the local surroundings.

The first part of the book (Chapters 2 to 4) consists of a classic description of the archaeological investigation, detailing the fieldwork results in terms of surface architecture and conservation assessment of both Tilantongo and Apoala. It also includes an inventory of sites from the Apoala Valley with a reconstruction of the habitation history and settlement dynamics from the Late Formative, Postclassic, and Colonial periods (300 BC – AD 1521). The second part (Chapters 5 to 7) discusses community archaeology and collaborative research, highlighting the negotiated participation in the research in terms of reactive and interactive approaches and questioning the representation of community members and of archaeologists in terms of knowledge



production. Thus, the need for reaching consensus and creating methods is argued on the basis of a collective endeavour where "archaeological writing is no exception."

Nevertheless, it is hard to connect the former with the latter partly because of a change in structure (narrator shifts from third person to first person) but also because of a change in content (the narrative focuses on the participatory archaeological fieldwork). There are other difficulties reading the text, one of them regarding the use of Spanish notes within the main text and also in the appendices; in my opinion these need translation, especially considering that the author mentions that one of the communicative problems in Mixteca Alta was the use of technical language, apart from the Spanish-English language barrier. Geurds also mentioned that he critically evaluated the effects of his research developed in collaboration with the Oaxacan Centre of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH-Oaxaca) and with participation of the Escuela Nacional de Antropología e Historia (ENAH) by looking at the effects of the power relations in identity creation and transformation, which in my judgement is not further developed in the text.

In general, I would say that the format of the book could be improved. In my opinion, the second part should be the first thus allowing the author to develop the core of his argument in participatory archaeology rather than diluting it with the descriptive section. The pictures in the text have a lot to say. I noticed that in some of them there were no names of locales or reference to the community members, which does not occur with the pictures where archaeologists appear. A final thing to mention is the use of the exact UTM reference for the archaeological sites in the inventory. It calls my attention because in some countries of Latin

America, legislation regarding monumental and heritage sites restricts the use of geographical coordinates in order to protect the archaeological remains.

In *Grounding the Past*, Alexander Geurds contributes to the growing debate of ethics in archaeological fieldwork. He discusses the position of archaeology in the matter of public needs and demands rather than purely for academic research development; in his words: "the issue of who gets to interpret whose history is a contentious one." He criticises the concept of community archaeology arguing, in chapter 5, that reflexivity is not only part of the archaeological excavation process but also crucial for the communicative aspects of local participants as part of the archaeological fieldwork. In so doing, he takes a step forward in reaching consensus and generating new methods for collaborating with local communities.

Of most interest for me was that Geurds incorporated oral tradition in his approach to participatory archaeology and, in this context, discussed the concept of landscape because it was narrated and embedded in both archaeology and the local community for generating knowledge regarding local history. In this sense, he argues that landscape is conceptualised as a recursive relationship from precolonial to contemporary times, concluding that the construction of local heritage in Monte Negro and Apoala is linked to landscape features including archaeological sites and natural places without material culture. Therefore, he incorporates something I would refer to as "places of memory," which are local indigenous perceptions of history. Thus, his research aims for "grounding the past" of the Mixteca Alta area building on contemporary local knowledge which is something more archaeological projects today strive to achieve.

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## When Moral Conviction Breaks Down

a review of

### *The Ethics of Archaeology: Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice*

Edited by Chris Scarre and Geoffrey Scarre  
Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK. 330 pp.  
ISBN 978-0521549424 (paper). \$40. 2006.

From the green revolution to the products we consume, it is clear that we are living in an overtly "ethicized" world. The rhetoric of moral conviction has come to permeate political, professional, and public spheres to such an extent that it often blurs the boundaries between the ethics we preach and the nature of conduct that actually ensues. Over the last fifteen years of embroiled debate with indigenous peoples, issues of material ownership, and the responsibilities of Science, archaeologists have become increasingly aware of the wide gulf that often separates their profession's daily practice from the looming ideals of its formalized ethical codes. While the recent discipline has witnessed a verbosely sincere process of ethical re-branding, many archaeologists continue to insist that an adherence to codified 'Rights and Wrongs' only detracts attention from ground-level dilemmas and the complexities of researching the past in the modern day world.

When I was first introduced to Chris and Geoffrey Scarre's 2006 co-edited volume, *The Ethics of Archaeology: Philosophical Perspectives on Archaeological Practice*, I admittedly braced myself for boredom. Having spent a significant portion of my academic career studying the evolution of archaeology's professional ethics, I anticipated a familiar formula of arguments espousing stewardship, accountability, and the common heritage of humanity. While these seemingly omnipresent themes are indeed what I found, I was pleasantly surprised by the unconventional manner in which they were approached. At face value, the issues explored throughout the book's fifteen chapters are almost indistinguishable from those addressed by most of archaeology's professional ethical codes—looting, artifact commercialization, and the responsibilities of archaeological "caretakers" to both the human and material record. Rather than being promoted as epitomes of a professional standard, the themes are demoted to a status of inherent logical dysfunction. As the editors clearly point out in the book's introduction, readers "will be left not with solutions but with a series of questions."

The format of *The Ethics of Archaeology* is wisely chosen as one of loosely bound thematic sections, the divisions of which the editors themselves admit are "to some extent arbitrary." Rather than detracting from the book's legibility, the overlapping