

Commentary

Archaeological Context and the Correlating Concept of Value

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Abstract

This paper explores the importance of the role of archaeological context in shaping the concept of value, with a focus on Phoenician trade, technology, and cultural identity. Drawing on the excavation of the Phoenician shipwreck at Bajo de la Campana, it demonstrates how contextual evidence transforms isolated artifacts into a coherent narrative of economic systems, technological innovation, and social practices. The recovery of amphorae, silver ingots, and other traded goods reveals the vast scale of Phoenician maritime networks and their reliance on silver as both a medium of exchange and a foundation of their economy. Central to this prosperity was the trade of Tyrian purple dye, a commodity whose rarity, technological complexity, and cultural exclusivity elevated it beyond material worth to a marker of status and identity. The analysis extends beyond economic value to examine how heritage objects embody identity, spirituality, artistry, and aesthetics, illustrating that material culture is a medium of meaning rather than a static possession. Without context, artifacts risk being stripped of their interpretive depth, reduced to mere commodities with diminished scholarly and cultural worth. By situating objects within their archaeological, historical, and symbolic frameworks, this study argues that context is the birthplace of value, transforming physical remnants into testimonies of human creativity, belief, and interconnectedness.

Keywords

Context, Value, Archaeology, Shipwrecks, Philosophy

1. Introduction

Context is defined as the circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood. In archaeology, context is monumentally significant, as it is not exclusively the individual entity that captivates our interest, but the story it tells through its connection and association with its surroundings.

The Phoenicians, famous for their sought after purple dye, have extremely limited surviving records; they're almost nonexistent. In fact, the first evidence of the prominence of

Phoenician purple dye in the Mediterranean has come to light through texts from Ugarit and Hittite sources [1]. However, through the first excavation of a Phoenician shipwreck at Bajo de la Campana, 30 kilometers northeast of Cartagena in southeast Spain, an extortionate amount of information and understanding of a society we knew very little about has been uncovered. The shipwreck, excavated by the Institute of Nautical Archaeology (INA), had run aground and distributed its contents along the seafloor and in the entrance of a sea cave, preserving much of its possessions for

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analysis. An exorbitant quantity of amphorae- stackable storage vessels most frequently used for wine and garum, a Mediterranean fish sauce, were found aboard the wreck, providing evidence of mass production [2, 3]. This excavation, spanning from 2007-2011, provided the first archaeological insight into the sheer quantity and extent of Phoenician maritime trade [2, 3].

2. The Value of Silver

Among a cargo of ceramic and bronze artifacts, elephant tusks, lead ore, and amber- traded from the Baltic region of northern Europe, thus providing evidence of complex maritime trade, the most enlightening discovery was that of silver. This metal, traded from Iberia, now Spain, was not limited in use to the revolutionization of weaponry manufacturing, but also provided evidence of a monumental discovery: coin currency [2, 3]. Silver, valuable enough to lack association with the potential fluctuations of the economy, but prominent and common enough to where the majority of individuals could partake in the financial system, was the ideal medium. The Phoenicians relied on silver to decorate their temples, as well as to pay tribute to the Assyrian empire [1]. This would not have been possible without the innovative invention of the bellows for the smelting furnaces. "The introduction of bellows is one of the most important contributions of Phoenician technology," says Thomas Schattner, a professor of classical archaeology at Germany's University of Giessen. "It permits bigger ovens, higher temperatures, more successful melting, and much bigger amounts of metal. It's the beginning of industrial production. You would not obtain this amount of silver by using the old-fashioned technology" [4].

Silver coins, also called obols, dating from the 4th to the 12 Century BCE, were formed from the ingots found through shipwreck evidence by the process of smelting. This provided a basis of currency for their prized Phoenician dye.

3. Removing the Context

The overlap of texts from Ugarit and Hittite sources, with the size of the slag heaps at the clay nozzles that had been attached to leather bellows, combined with the shipwreck evidence provides for a more well-rounded understanding of these ancient people. We know the silver was mass produced, they had a strong, coin-based economy, which benefited greatly from the mass production and trade of amphorae, and we have an accurate gauge of with who and what they traded. Now take these items out of context. Take a looted lump of silver labeled "silver, old, probably Greek". Not only would museums not want it, they would be actively discouraged from pursuing the entity due to the 1970 UNESCO Heritage Preservation act. In addition, the value of the object is limited to the intrinsic value of the material itself. Take a

single looted amphorae. Educated individuals could make an accurate assumption of its origination, but would be unaware of its purpose, its destination, and its surroundings. We would not have evidence of mass production of any kind, pottery and metal alike. The value is not limited to the object in its entirety- the value lies in the depiction and understanding it provides, unlocking a door to a past world we previously could not comprehend. New discoveries provide concrete evidence of trade from Spain to the western Mediterranean, which in turn broadened the market for Phoenician purple dye [2, 3].

4. The Value of Color

This raises an obvious question- how are we aware of the prominence and significance of purple dye among the Phoenicians? A dominating percentage of historians believe the name Phoenicia is derived from the Greek word phoinos, translating roughly to 'dark red'; through relationship with the dye, it provided not just an economic gain but an identity as well [5]. The true genius of this process is exposed early on, once we are aware that the Murex trunculus, Purpura lapillus, Helix ianthina, and the Murex brandaris shellfish that are the source of the dye are most commonly found in deep water [1]. This requires the understanding and construction of suspended baited traps, and that is merely the acquisition of the desired source. From here the process was formed from what we can only assume to be trial and error; putrefied crushed shellfish were exposed to sunlight for an extended period of time, thus the dye was more easily extractable from the glands. Over the course of three days, according to Pliny the Elder's Natural History, salt contributed to the final product as it was boiled down, in vessels of either tin or lead. "It is sufficient to leave them to steep for three days, no more, because the fresher they are, the greater virtue there is in the liquor. It is then set to boil..." [5]. Once extracted, the precipitate insoluble dye is transformed into a phenol derivative, meaning deoxidized- this provided the most uniquely valuable aspect: a product that did not fade; It was immune to discoloration and fading as a result of washing through the contact of oxygen [1]. Individual fibers were dyed once or twice, depending on the intensity of pigment desired, and then woven into decadent garments and various other fabrics. For perspective, historian B. Caseae explained, "10,000 shellfish would produce 1 gram of dyestuff, and that would only dye the hem of a garment in a deep colour" [6]. We are aware of this through textual and archaeological evidence, primarily discarded crushed shells piling 40 meters high at Sidon, Lebanon [1]. From the emperor Diocletian, we know one pound of this prized purple dye was equal in value to approximately three pounds of gold. From this, we know the rare and sought after dye was quite literally worth more than its weight in gold [1]. We can also gauge through numerical study that the sheer quantity of shellfish along the Phoenician coast, or lack

thereof, implies a consistently wide harvest of the species. From this engineering, artistic, biological and economic feat was borne a status symbol- Royal purple. The phrase “borne to the purple” was derived from this, the color used to identify extremely high class- royalty [1]. Originally a clearly visible way to define and separate the higher class from the lower, under the reign of Alexander Severus (222 - 235 CE) the blend of purple dye and silk became exclusive for the elite- only the emperor was permitted to wear the purple robes, along with those he favoured. Foreigners were deemed unworthy and prohibited to don the precious cloth [1].

5. The Economy of Color

The Phoenician purple dye trade strengthened their economy tremendously, making it possible for Phoenicians to acquire the Spanish silver that was the fundamental, underlying foundation of their economy in its entirety [7]. Without this prized dye, silver would not have flowed like a cornucopia from Spain to the outstretched hands of Phoenicians. The bellows were made as they were desired, a necessary advancement in the face of abundant resources. This advancement in Phoenician Technology continues to amaze and baffle archaeologists, but the evidence is prominent, consistent, and now, abundant. Archaeological evidence from all over the world overlapping with shipwreck evidence provides us with an incredibly well-rounded comprehension of the Phoenician's identity, their trade and values, status, economy, ingenious technological advancements, construction, and inventive creativity. Context is indescribably and incomprehensibly essential- directly interconnected to the concept of value.

This is multiplexed in nature, composed of intricate layers of projections. For the relative value of these layers, that is, the order in terms of sheer quantity of substantial contribution to the terminological intelligibility, is perplexing and arguably, problematic. By arbitrary selection, let us look closer at the concept of identity.

6. Conceptual Identity

Heritage- specifically material object- is valuable because it in itself carries identity. It constructs and establishes a connection to history through an entity created by the hands of ancestors. We ask how projected value is measured- that is not anyone's place to say with certainty, save for the individuals associated with that entity- those who carry the stories of the ones before them and forge a connection between the mind and the material world. Heritage in itself is a medium in which identity is expressed, therefore it is not merely coincidental that the interrelation of identity and heritage is apparent and axiomatic. Identity is conveyed in the process of creation- take weaving as an example. The

threads that make up the finished product are available due to the nature of the individual's surroundings- the accessibility and abundance of resources- this is indisputable. But thread does not transform into woven wonders- it must be worked with a skill taught by another, a skill valuable enough in the culture to be passed on from generation to generation. It is valued enough to initiate a supply and demand- valuable enough that the cost of materials and time invested was not issue enough to hinder creation. Frequently, myths are woven into the cloth, stories of a people proud and powerfully aware of their history. Colors of cultural significance can be selected, such as the exclusive Phoenician purple dye. Tapestries and other art mediums are often created with magical intent, in hopes of fertility, wealth, protection, and more. In direct relation, this is a minute aspect as to why loss of culture can be extremely destructive; it provides internal strength and happiness and structure, and once that is lost or in the process of being lost, one cannot turn to another's values to replace their own. Within the layer of identity, there are many aspects that contribute to the so-called ‘value’ of an entity.

It is as if the past is a colossal pythos and we are striving to collect the shards that build its magnificence in order to gain an informed perspective. Elaborating further on the spiritual aspect, there is an entire field of archaeology dedicated to the understanding of ancient customs, practices and myths ranging from creation myths to epics- Spiritual Archaeology. This study is best described as the study of spiritual origins of past cultures, adding another dimension to the conventional field. The aim of this is to construct and contemplate the evident yet largely unexplored greater purpose behind material evidence. People of all cultures have expressed their values and ideals through artistic meaning since the upper paleolithic- ideal physical beauty is expressed through statues of deities, paintings of goddesses, tapestries of nymphs and much more. We are able to gauge various beauty standards of many ancient people through careful analysis of how they depicted their divine. This is often directly transferred to human worship and more specifically, human appearances influenced by correlation between mortal and celestial.

7. The Aztec, Color and Status

There is an intensely powerful connection here as well- take the Aztec people for an example. The Aztecs filed and drilled holes into their teeth so as to insert jadeite, pyrite, or turquoise within the tooth [8]. Many cultures have used precious jewels and stones as status symbols- a declaration of the power and position they hold in society. However, if this were dismissed as merely a status symbol, we would be comprehending but a fraction of the true intention. Performed in a ceremonial celebration of young adulthood, this spiritual practice was a rite of passage, symbolizing the transition to adulthood- much more valuable than the

intrinsic value of the stones [8]. The same is the case for the septum piercing of gold or jade- if interpreted as purely a form of material beauty or economic position, we would not perceive nor comprehend the intention to symbolize the sun and water gods, creating a direct connection between the self and the divine.

8. Spirituality and Beauty

Artistic aspects are often linked with the spiritual, for inspiration is a prominent tool in the forging of material creation. The word “inspiration” is derived from the noun “inspiratio” and the verb “inspirare”. To take it one step further, the term “Inspirare” is a term procured from the Latin prefix “in” and the verb “spirare” (to breathe). Originally meaning “to be imbued with spirit”, this word can be interpreted as “breathed into by the divine” or “to breathe in by divine” [14, 15]. This is appurtenant to two interrelated qualities: artistic and aesthetic. Inspiration from divinity is expressive on an entirely separate, yet connected platform. To temporarily remove it from the equation entirely, let us look closer at the aesthetic contribution to antiquity. To be beautiful- what does this mean? In an artistic sense, it means that a people conveyed their emotion and expression wonderfully through a delicate yet powerful material medium. In an economic sense, it simply implies higher demand on the art market. As monotonous as the former may be, it is a predominant contributor to the economic structure that is the archaeological market. Though many find beauty in every artifact in existence, some have a limited perspective on what is deemed beautiful- what is thus deemed valuable. A statue of a goddess in all her glory, a tool engraved in intricate detail, these would take precedence in a buyer's mind over shards of pottery or arrowheads. For something to be aesthetically pleasing- who wouldn't want to be in possession of such beauty? To gaze your eyes upon an entity and know not just its age and origin, but to fully comprehend the artistic creation before you- that is what attracts many to the aesthetic. The captivating emotion within, the sense of awe washing over, the wonder resting in the eyes- how could one not be drawn to the aesthetic? It is a wonder within a world of wonders.

9. Conclusion

Context contributes incomprehensibly to the concept of value. Value in itself has many layers, not limited to that which has been discussed- identity, spiritual, artistic, and aesthetic. It is an egotistical perception that an object does not hold value until we project it onto the entity, praising it as spiritual, aesthetic art, or dismissing it as nothing more than primitive. No matter our thoughts, an object is an object

and our values cannot change the form itself; we cannot shift the entity to conform to our ideals. The value is however, directly related to aspects that contribute to its worth- aspects we have fabricated ourselves. Objects are the subject which values are placed upon, whether societal value or individual- we must not underestimate the power of individual worth. Unravel the layers of projected value and you will find a simple object, nonetheless a potentially valuable entity, but an object just the same. As long as there is supply and demand, there will be that which is favored- the beautiful over the crude.

Physically, these materials may be more valuable based on factors such as relative scarcity, appearance, durability, and accessibility [9]. Culturally, their value may be dependent on utility, restricted possession, workability, and aesthetic value [9]. Acquisition of these stones was intricate: the interactions surrounding the exchange of stones such as jade has been described as that between elites and commoners, as a type of offering or tariff [10]. Cochineal-based red pigments were not only linked with ritual practice and symbolism, but extended to social standing. The ownership of such materials marked elite status in the realms of both life and death [11]. Finely crafted jewels often adorned the body in ancient Mesoamerica. These were valuable and highly charged with religious significance and creative energy. Piercings made personal space to accommodate stones, and was done so through a piercing process that had social significance through the willing participation of bloodshed [12]. The plasticity of the body allows for such modifications, the head especially serving as a central locus of spirituality [13].

Upon first discovery of an artifact, context was not nearly so influential. All that is new captivates the unfamiliar; concepts of what is more or less contextualized could easily be overlooked. Now, we are at a place where context is understood to be vital, a factor that has not varied but has been met with varying interpretations of its importance. Pillaging and looting has led to a loss of information surrounding artefacts, not comparing remotely to the contextualized antiquities already in existence. This decreases the entity's value and evaporates any information associated with it. Context must be comprehended in its entirety, for within archaeological context lies the birth of value.

Author Contributions

Anika Elema is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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