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CDCD - Digital Reflection

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Scales



Photos documenting archaeological finds and artifacts often feature another object in the image, an elusive and silent co-protagonist: the archaeological scale. The scale is the instrument that gives us information about the dimensions of the find. But it is also something else: it is the object that initiates the relationship with something that for the first time comes to our senses; it is the controlled and familiar element – about which we have certain and objective, reassuring knowledge – that tames the find and brings it into our world, that makes it our own.



The archaeological scale is a rigorous tool, precise in its lines and its bichromy. It contrasts with the uncertain and dusty surfaces of the excavations where it is used, with the blurred patinas of the finds, with the eroded and jagged contours of their fragments. If time and environmental vicissitudes have corroded, altered, and transformed the find, bringing it to a state of near-nature, the archaeological scale stands out for its geometric and abstract artificiality.



When we look at these photos, our educated and disciplined gaze is drawn to the find: we “know”, by culture and context, that the protagonist of the images is the object found and unearthed; we have to look at the artifact if we want to discover and know something new.

But if a fresh or alien eye, a purely biological or technical gaze from another civilization were looking at the pictures, the focus would most likely be on the definite evidence of the scale. At a retinal glance, the scales often stand out more than the artifacts. Interest – or danger – would be focused there.



This kind of images have evident connections with another field of photography: the criminal and forensic photography. The archaeological site is like a crime scene; the finds are evidences, the artifacts are clues to be investigated.

This is more glaring when the photographed find has anthropomorphic characteristics, and even more starkly when the archaeological excavation reveals intimate and personal objects, human bones and remains.



Anyone, with little, can build a scale. In archaeological photos you may happen to notice handmade scales, made by archaeologists themselves for their excavations.

I designed and built my scale, too. Once made, I buried it in a random and anonymous place, not at all exceptional or relevant. Now it is alone, unmarried and orphaned. The hope is that it will be found in the distant future, making itself a mysterious find. Who knows: maybe someone will place something indecipherable and enigmatic beside it.



Afterword

I started to think about archaeological scales in a colonial perspective after visiting the Museo de Malaga, during my residency in Spain in April 2025. In one of the rooms of the museum, I was struck by the large photographic lightboxes documenting archaeological excavations and the discovery of artifacts. Arriving from the other side of the room, looking at the images from a distance with a purely retinal gaze, still trying to figure out what I was looking at, my attention was divided: the uncertain shapes of the artifacts and the rigorous lines of the scales questioned me with equal intensity. In that coexistence of objects there were tensions to reflect on.



The contradictory nature of the scale – an object that is seemingly evident, but which our filtered and domesticated gaze hides in the background – seemed to me to be an emblematic metaphor of our colonial thinking, so deeply rooted and internalized. The scale is always there, not just in these photos. It is in everything we look at and everything we do: it is in the background, it works in background, we have to focus to see it and try to turn it off.

Back in Italy, I went to the National Library in Rome, among the shelves of the IsIAO (Italian Institute for Africa and the Orient). Its photo library preserves the photographic archives inherited from the old Ministry of Colonies, active during Fascism, comprising tens of thousands of photographic prints and negatives.



The images on the digital reflection (pages 1 to 6) are taken from the photographic documentation of the Cirene Excavation Campaign, promoted by Italy in 1936. The aim, through the excavation of the ancient city, was to demonstrate the Roman roots of North Africa, legitimizing the Italian colonial presence and expansion in the continent.

Thanks to Gioia Toscani De Col for directing me to the IsIAO, and thanks to Lorenzo Declich of the Central Library for his support in researching the materials.

*Pages 7 and 8: images of the Museo de Malaga, with the photographic lightboxes depicting archaeological finds and scales.
In this page: the original folders containing the photographic documentation of the Cyrene Excavation Campaign.*