

Archaeological Reports: From Securitization and Classified Documentation to a Scientific Approach and Open Access

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Abstract: This article emphasizes the fundamental role of archaeological excavation reports in the production, preservation, and transmission of knowledge, arguing for the necessity of their timely preparation, publication, and open accessibility. It contends that excavation is inherently destructive, and only through comprehensive and accurate documentation can the stratigraphy, structures, and finds be reconstructed for future research. According to the methodological and ethical principles of archaeology and the charters of major international institutions, the prompt and unrestricted publication of excavation reports is essential for transparency, scholarly critique, and the cumulative progress of scientific inquiry. The paper demonstrates that restricting or securitizing these reports hinders scientific verification, data integration, and the development of large-scale comparative studies, while increasing the risk of data distortion and political misuse of the past. Challenges such as intellectual property concerns, limited resources, lack of standardized formats, and site protection issues are examined, and solutions including open-access digital repositories, institutional mandates, phased publication, and academic cultural reform, are proposed. The article concludes that archaeological data constitute a shared intellectual heritage, and open access to excavation reports is a prerequisite for ensuring accountability, vitality, and meaningful advancement in archaeological research.

Keywords:

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1. Introduction

Archaeology, as the discipline dedicated to reconstructing the human past through material and cultural remains, not only documents humanity's shared heritage but also plays a pivotal role in shaping cultural identity, understanding historical sequences, and addressing fundamental questions regarding the trajectory of social evolution. However, the core of this discipline does not reside solely in field excavation; rather, it emerges in the subsequent stages of analysis, interpretation, and dissemination of findings. An archaeological excavation report constitutes the primary and direct record that transforms the inherently destructive process of excavation into enduring, referable data for future generations (Renfrew & Bahn, 2020).

Drawing upon methodological principles and professional ethics, this article underscores the critical necessity of preparing comprehensive and timely excavation reports, as well as the imperative for unrestricted open access to these reports to ensure the integrity, transparency, and dynamism of the scientific process within archaeological communities. The central argument is that archaeological data, if not published and made freely accessible, remain fundamentally incomplete and unscientific, posing a significant barrier to the advancement of the discipline.

As early as 1974, approximately fifty years ago, Philip Rahtz formally asserted that "excavation without publication is a form of destruction" (Rahtz, 1974). International charters and ethical guidelines of professional archaeological organizations—including the World Archaeological

Congress (WAC), the Society for American Archaeology (SAA, Principle Six), the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA), and the European Association of Archaeologists (EAA)—have emphasized timely publication and open sharing of excavation results within the scholarly community.

Archaeological records are regarded as a shared heritage of humankind (Dingli, 2006; Omland, 2006). Regrettably, in the past year, there have been instances in which certain Iranian archaeologists, including those educated abroad and claiming international research credentials, publicly or in professional discourse endorsed the notion that excavation reports should remain confidential as part of national archives or classified archaeological documents. This position undermines the principles of scholarly transparency and scientific progress. The present article briefly addresses the necessity of timely publication and unhindered access to archaeological reports for the national academic community.

2. Excavation Reports: From Field Documentation to the Foundation of Archaeological Science

An excavation report constitutes the only tangible product of a field project that remains after the conclusion of excavation. Excavation is inherently a destructive process; strata and structures are removed once and for all, and it is only through meticulous documentation that the “virtual reconstruction” of a site becomes possible (Barker, 2016). Accordingly, a comprehensive report should include the following components:

Documentation: Detailed descriptions of strata (stratigraphy), contexts, special features and loci, and inter-stratigraphic relationships (Harris Matrix). This section forms the backbone of chronological interpretations and the reconstruction of site formation processes.

Recording of Finds: A complete inventory and description of all cultural materials, including ceramics, coins, bones, botanical samples, and other artifacts, along with the precise location of each find.

Visual Documentation: Topographic maps, plans, stratigraphic sections, aerial and ground photographs.

Specialized Analyses: Results of absolute dating methods (e.g., radiocarbon dating), geochemical analyses, bioarchaeological investigations, and other scientific examinations (Hester et al., 2016).

Failure to produce such a report result in the irretrievable loss of information and constitutes a breach of the ethical responsibility toward cultural heritage. As Hodos emphasizes, “excavation without publication is merely a legalized form of looting” (Hodos, 2017). This statement clearly illustrates that, from an ethical perspective, there is little difference between an unauthorized looter seeking antiquities and an archaeologist conducting excavation without disseminating a report; in both cases, the ultimate outcome is the destruction of the context and permanent loss of data and findings.

3. Open Access to Excavation Reports: The Cornerstone of Scientific Research

Science is a collective and cumulative endeavor, whose progress relies on the review, critique, and building upon previous findings. This process requires that raw and primary data be accessible to the scholarly community (Kansa & Kansa, 2021).

3.1 .Verifiability and Testability

The foundation of scientific research lies in the principle of testability or replicability. In archaeology, due to the inherently non-repeatable nature of excavation, the closest equivalent is verifiability. Other researchers must be able to examine the reasoning, interpretations, and conclusions of an excavation through the original report and, if necessary, critique or validate them (Wylie, 2020: 45). When reports are stored in personal or institutional archives with restricted

access, this fundamental principle of science is violated. For example, a groundbreaking interpretation of the transition from foraging to food production cannot gain full acceptance within the scientific community if the underlying data are inaccessible for review.

3.2 .Data Integration and Macro-Analytical Studies

Modern archaeology increasingly emphasizes comparative, macro-scale, and Big Data approaches. Research such as mapping trade patterns over large regions, analyzing long-term climatic shifts, or studying ancient population genetics requires the compilation and analysis of data from dozens or even hundreds of excavations (Kintigh et al., 2018). If these data are scattered, formatted inconsistently, or access is restricted, conducting such advanced research becomes impossible or extremely difficult. Open access to national archaeological data provides the necessary infrastructure for such studies. Until researchers can study and examine these datasets, generating analytical models and theoretical frameworks in archaeology remains severely constrained. Furthermore, access should not be monopolized by specific individuals or elite segments of the scholarly community; scientific equity fosters intellectual creativity and innovation within specialized communities.

3.3 .Scientific Transparency and Accountability

Open access to excavation reports is the foundation of transparency and accountability in archaeology. Transparency serves as a critical safeguard against both unintentional distortion and deliberate bias in data interpretation. When researchers know that their primary data and methodologies are visible and reviewable by the wider scholarly community, they are intrinsically motivated to uphold the highest standards of accuracy and integrity (Kintigh et al., 2018). This issue becomes particularly salient in contexts where archaeology is employed to advance political, nationalist, or historical narratives. As Kohl (1998) argued in his analysis of Near Eastern archaeology, “archaeology is inevitably a political activity... our ethical responsibility is to make this politics as transparent as possible through full publication of our data and interpretations” (Kohl, 1998). When primary data remain hidden behind restricted access, the potential for ideological misuse of the past and the “fabrication of history” to support specific national or ethnic narratives increases significantly. Open access allows all scholars to evaluate arguments directly based on primary evidence, serving as the most effective safeguard against personal or political biases influencing interpretations of material historical evidence (Mickel, 2021).

3.4 .Accelerating the Knowledge Cycle and Preventing Redundancy

Delays in publishing final reports, sometimes extending for decades, or complete non-publication, result in “knowledge stagnation.” Other researchers remain unaware of the latest findings and may expend time and resources on studies that have already been conducted or invalidated by new data. Rapid and open access to primary reports—even in pre-publication form—significantly accelerates the cycle of knowledge production and dissemination, preventing the waste of valuable resources.

4. Challenges and Strategies for Implementing Open Access

Although the benefits of open access are indisputable, multiple obstacles and challenges must be carefully considered.

4.1 .Challenges

Intellectual Property and Authorship Concerns: Archaeologists often dedicate years or even decades to studying a site and are concerned that rapid data release could allow others to publish articles or books based on their work before they do.

Limited Time and Resources: Analyzing and preparing data for publication is a time-consuming and costly process, often insufficiently accounted for in project planning and budgeting.

Site Protection Issues: In some cases, publishing precise site locations may expose them to looting or unauthorized excavations.

Lack of Standardization: The absence of standardized formats and protocols for recording and publishing data hinders integration and comparability across studies.

4.2 .Strategies

Institutional Policy and Mandatory Publication: Academic institutions, research centers, and heritage authorities (e.g., ministries and museums) should require the publication of final reports within a specified timeframe (e.g., 3–5 years after excavation) as a precondition for excavation permits and funding. In Iran, while mandatory article publication has been in place for some years, full excavation reports are still rarely published. Since 1402 (2023–2024), under the leadership of the author at the Cultural Heritage and Tourism Research Institute and Dr. Sajad Ali Beigi at the Archaeology Research Center, the intellectual and scientific rights to archaeological projects have been set for five years; after this period, reports will be made accessible to all researchers.

Establishment of Open Digital Repositories: Online, free-access databases, such as the Digital Archaeological Record (tDAR) or Open Context, allow archaeologists to upload reports and datasets. These platforms facilitate intellectual property management, publication scheduling, and data standardization ([Kansa et al., 2020](#)).

Proper Attribution and Data Citation: The scholarly culture should value citations of raw datasets as much as references to articles and books, providing incentives for archaeologists to share their data.

Staged Publication: Preliminary reports can be published immediately after excavation, followed by detailed final reports once specialized analyses are complete.

Education and Cultural Change: Integrating open access ethics into academic and professional archaeology training is essential for institutionalizing these practices.

5. Conclusion

Producing comprehensive excavation reports and providing unrestricted open access to them is not optional; it is an ethical and scientific imperative in archaeology. This practice ensures that the outcomes of the inherently destructive excavation process are preserved, contributing to the integrity, transparency, and dynamism of the discipline. Unpublished reports are “data graveyards” that never participate in building humanity’s historical knowledge.

The global archaeological community is increasingly moving toward Open Archaeology ([Wilson & Edwards, 2015](#)), a paradigm in which data, methodologies, and ideas are freely exchanged. The future vitality and impact of archaeology depend on the recognition that archaeological data are a shared heritage, not the personal property of any individual archaeologist. Investment in digital infrastructure, institutional policy reform, and the promotion of a culture of data sharing represents an investment in the preservation and accountability of the discipline itself.

Over the past five decades, numerous significant archaeological sites have been excavated in Iran. While some committed archaeologists have published their preliminary reports in the form of books and various analytical articles, there are others who have excavated highly important and key sites without releasing even a single page of report. It can be stated with confidence that the timely publication and easy accessibility of archaeological excavation reports could bring about a substantial transformation in Iranian archaeology. Iran’s cultural heritage has faced numerous crises, and the absence of—or restricted access to—archaeological reports constitutes yet another dimension of the cultural heritage crisis in the country.

Drawing on the author's managerial and professional experience in universities, research institutes, the Ministry of Cultural Heritage, and provincial offices, archaeological reports can be classified into several categories:

- Archaeologists who have not produced any report.
- Archaeologists who submitted the report of a different site by mistake.
- Archaeologists who produced incomplete or flawed reports.
- Archaeologists who produced reports that are now lost and no longer accessible.
- Archaeologists who produced reports but deny access to them even 30 years later.
- Archaeologists who produced reports, but the materials and findings are either missing or incomplete in provincial or municipal museum and heritage storage facilities.

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