

BREADWINNING & ARCHAEOLOGY – IT'S PART OF THE GAME, FOLKS!

July 11, 2014 Maria BeierleindeGutierrez Community Archaeology, Curation, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2014, Public Archaeology, Publishing Academia, Altiplano de Sama, Anthropology, archaeologist, Archaeology, Argentina, Bolivia, Ceramics, Chile, Community Archaeology, Curating, Maria Beierlein de Gutierrez, Material culture, Museums, Sama, Science, shovel-swinging archaeologist, South America, South Bolivia, teaching archaeology, Yavi-Chicha



Maria Beierlein de Gutierrez, Yavi-Chicha ceramic, colonial ceramic and plastic container

When I found out about the Day of Archaeology, my heart went out to it. I was inspired to write about this day to make the world know what all these supposedly dusty archaeologists are working on. Let me put my grain of sand to it! As an archaeologist, I am working for 10 years now in a remote region of South America: the Altiplano de Sama in South Bolivia. Home to a overwhelming regional culture called Yavi-Chicha, which has been consistent for as long as 1000 years between 500 and 1535 A.C. We don't know much about it, and that is where all my questions about it come from. Who were these people? Why were they so self-constrained but at the same time so widely spread in Bolivia, Chile and Argentina? Apart from this archaeological work I have been writing at [Language of Things](#) on materiality, museums, archaeology and other musings. Its kind of a non-scientific channel of work.

And it was when I heard about the actual DAY of archaeology, the 11th of July, that I realized that maybe my Day of Archaeology would depict something typical of archaeological work, but that is NOT included in the least in the popular vision of "*the shovel-swinging archaeologist*". It's the fact that I won't be doing "*archaeology*" in the term of "*working in the field/lab*". Instead, I will be dedicating half of the day to the work that earns my and my family's daily bread. Which has nothing whatsoever to do with archaeology.

And the other half of the day I organized someone who will take care to pick up my son from school and I myself will be off: to a course on museum on “*Teaching & Curating*“. And by now, I can almost see the question marks in the eyes of everyone. What the hell has all this to do with archaeology? I can tell you.

Archaeology, as has been stated over and over by some awful colleagues (have a look [here](#), if you like), is a job which is almost always underpaid. That is, if you get a job at all. Which I haven't. At least not an archaeological one. I am working in an office, and all my archaeological work, the writing, thinking and analyzing sherds, has been reduced to my spare time. Which is not much, considering that I am alone with my son because his dad is doing an extended fieldwork session far away (which I support, by the way, so I won't complain about this). But this means that time is reduced to the wee hours of the night. And I am not alone in this – almost every archaeologist I know has some sideline of work that has NOTHING to do with archaeology – but it pays our rent.

Over the years, this situation became more and more intolerable to my *archaeological soul* and I decided to go off and try another line of work, one which is more in line with archaeology. Which is where the second half of my “Day of Archaeology” comes in. Curating & teaching at a museum is in line with my fervent belief that [we have to communicate archaeology and the past](#), as much and as best we can. So I took this course consisting of 5 modules, and am learning about curating & teaching at the museum. I am trying for a year now to get into it, but museums (as well as archaeology as a career) scarcely offer “real” jobs. And I can't afford to apply to almost unpaid internships. And I can't be taking courses which require me to move house for 6 months and stay away from my home for weeks on end. Someone was joking these days that archaeologists don't have kids and it's true: doing archaeology is difficult if you want to raise children at the same time.

So, this is my day of archaeology: earning the daily bread in an office. Going off by noon, I switch over to the museum to take the course in order to get back to a job related to archaeology. And in the night, after sharing s'thoughts with colleagues as concerned with museum teaching as I am, I will be reading literature on sherds and ceramic analysis. Because in the end, something wonderful has happened: I can prepare myself and our son for a trip to South America, going to analyze some hundred sherds of the formative and regional period – i.e. between 500 b.C. – 1535 a.C. I got [funded for a four-week-trip](#) and we will be doing this together. That's the other side of archaeology: you get all the “exotic” fieldwork you ever wanted. So I will be back to where the photo above comes from: Bolivia. Seeing pots.

And this means that, again, I have to be 100 % prepared on topics like “*style*“, “*material culture*” and the meaning of things in a society that lived some 600-1000 years ago. It's one of the most fascinating works I've ever known and I have to admit that I will never cease to speak about its relevance to us. These sherds mean so much to the people that live right now in this region, that they founded a society that reincarnates the past to the living people. They claim to be descendants of the producers of this ceramic I am studying. They see these past people as their ancestors, as their cultural roots. If THIS is not relevance of the past to the here and now, I don't know what could ever be relevant. It's risky and it's controversial, but it IS a real connection of today's people to a past. A past that has been created and transformed, but a past that matters in a very direct way to many persons.

So, maybe my “Day of Archaeology” can sum up some parts of archaeology, even if I am not working currently in an archaeological job. But the non-archaeological bread winning, the desire of being currently developing skills to communicate our field of study and the practical work of studying a part of the past that is relevant to living people – maybe these three things can make clear what archaeologists do.

Let’s do it again&again&again!



Research team at Torohuayco, Sama, Bolivia, in 2007.