

What's Wrong with Speculation in *The Ostrakon*?

The guidelines for *The Ostrakon* were out of date and have been revised. The limitations and capabilities indicated in the past guidelines no longer apply and, perhaps most importantly, *The Ostrakon* has evolved such that we in fact no longer accept just any sort of article whatever as long as it pertains to Egypt. As a scientifically orientated journal, *The Ostrakon* now publishes articles that are based primarily on facts rather than belief or speculation. In recent times, articles have been submitted that were largely or entirely speculative and we have had, reluctantly, to reject them. Rejection is never pleasant either for the staff or the author; we prefer to avoid that in future.

There is a tension inherent in publishing any “scientific” article in archaeology because it is almost impossible to avoid some speculation. The physical or written evidence is almost always insufficient to provide unambiguous proof of what happened in ancient times or, especially, why it happened. It is of course possible to recite the facts and only the facts but interpretation is required to clothe them in meaning. How then should we distinguish between reasonable interpretation and excessive speculation in an article?

I propose that reasonable interpretation starts from the factual material and, using a minimum of inference, builds a case for a particular scenario. This notion was developed by William of Occam. As Wikipedia explains:

“Occam's razor (also spelled Ockham's razor) is a principle attributed to the 14th-century English logician and Franciscan friar William of Ockham. ... often paraphrased as ‘All things being equal, the simplest solution tends to be the best one.’ In other words, when multiple competing theories are equal in other respects, the principle recommends selecting the theory that introduces the fewest assumptions and postulates the fewest hypothetical entities. It is in this sense that Occam's razor is usually understood.”

In archaeology, there can be different interpretations that apply equally well to a given set of facts and observations (data). Articles with such diverse interpretations are accepted and welcome in *The Ostrakon*. However, when interpretations are based on little or no data; the articles necessarily are extremely speculative. “Data” can be a pretty broad term. Consider, for example, the following rudimentary collection of facts and observations:

- A. There are pyramids at Giza in Egypt
- B. The exterior of those pyramids consist of layers of enormous stone blocks.
- C. We see only stone construction lining the limited spaces we can observe within the pyramids.

Therefore: The Giza pyramids are probably entirely of stone construction which implies there are many thousands of blocks in each pyramid. This isn't data; it is interpretation based on the observed data.

Some people suggest, because building with huge blocks is very difficult, that space aliens may have built those pyramids. Most people recognize this as speculation because there are no known facts that point to such a conclusion. Whether consciously or not, they are applying Occam's Razor. Space alien aficionados may ask, rather plaintively, if it could be so why shouldn't they be allowed to say that it is so. “Where's the harm?” they ask. The answer to that question is very important as it gets to the heart of the matter. Readers tend to think that, if we publish something, it must be important enough to bring to the attention of the public and, despite disclaimers, that we somehow endorse it. The harm is that the speculative material might be accepted as factual. This process can sometimes be quite subtle.

In Egyptology, a particularly striking example of the “harm done” happened in the interpretation of the Amarna Letters. In essence, where the text was worn or obscure, a number of interpolations and interpretations were made in the early translations. The Egyptologists who made them, knew they were speculative but they seemed reasonable. Over the years these interpretations were taught to those Egyptologist's students of who taught them in turn to their student as “facts.” Still more speculations were piled on the accepted “facts” and were in turn accepted as factual by their students. Much of this house of cards came crashing down when, late in the last century, a new, fresh translation of the Amarna Letters was made by William Moran and it was found that much of the accepted interpretation was wrong or simply unsupported. In this case, the “harm done” is that the mistaken material remains in the literature to trip up the unwary.

This problem isn't new. A Biblical scholar named P. C. Cragie complained about cascaded interpretations of Canaanite texts: "An old and familiar process could be seen taking place: carefully phrased hypotheses became 'established facts,' simply by virtue of seniority, and conjectural readings in the footnotes of the thirties became the accepted texts in the speculations of the sixties and seventies."

The forgoing examples illustrate, I believe, how easily speculation can mislead and why articles in *The Ostrakon* should be primarily fact-based with a minimum of speculation. Interpretation is almost always needed to make sense of the facts but it needs to be restrained to prevent misleading our readers. There remains plenty of scope for provocative articles espousing unusual or novel interpretations, as long as those interpretations rationally depend on facts and observations.

In closing, I emphasize that we need good articles. If you have an idea for an article and are unsure about it, please contact *The Ostrakon's* Editor or members of the staff. We have a number of people who can help you create a creditable article and we would like to help you do so.

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