EARLY PHOTOGRAPHY AND ARCHAEOLOGY – A MATTER OF HYGIENE



Chris (Witmore) has sent me some comments about his fascinating research into early photography and archaeology –



Conze at Samothrace

Although photography had been used in the context of

archaeological practice for some time, it was only with the Samothrace excavation volumes that photographs were placed directly into the publication (Conze, Hauser and Niemann 1875 and Conze, Hauser and Benndorf 1880). The incorporation of the actual photographic print into the final publication of archaeological sites was significant. First, the intermediate step of transforming the photograph through copper engraving or lithography had been removed. Second, and most importantly, an unparalleled degree of detail was maintained in the final publication. With the removal of the intermediary step of transformation involved with engraving photographs, publishers took out any direct human transformation of image (besides that of selection on location) and brought mechanical reproduction directly into the documentation of the field. This created an immediacy and intimacy, which was to have ramifications in terms of perceptions of photographs as objective and transparent media. In this the detail captured in the emulsion could not be replicated through engravings. This detail was only limited by the quality of the silver bromide or silver halide emulsion utilized. Archaeological contexts could be transmitted visually. This would have ramifications

for field practice that were medium driven. For example, Cookson in “Photography for Archaeologists” (1954) regarded cleanliness as a virtue to be held above all others. He continues:

“no matter how correct the exposure and the development of the negative,
no matter how carefully a print is made, a wall with mud still clinging to
it, a floor poorly brushed, a pavement insufficiently washed, the badly-
trimmed edge of a cut can completely ruin the finest of photographs from
an archaeological standpoint. From experience, I know how heart-breaking
it can be to scrape a stone floor hour after hour, or to wash the
metalling of a Roman road pebble by pebble until I hoped that every stone
would come loose and there would be an end to any photograph ? but I know
the pleasure the ultimate result has brought when the photograph of the
finished work is seen. Some of the words on cleanliness

will appear again;
they cannot be over-emphasized. ALWAYS KEEP THE SITE CLEAN! Cleaned stone
and caulk glisten in the light their shapes sharp and clean when the earth
on which they lie is undercut and they are well brushed.” (13-14).



Curtius at Olympia

Cleanliness for the sake of the medium.