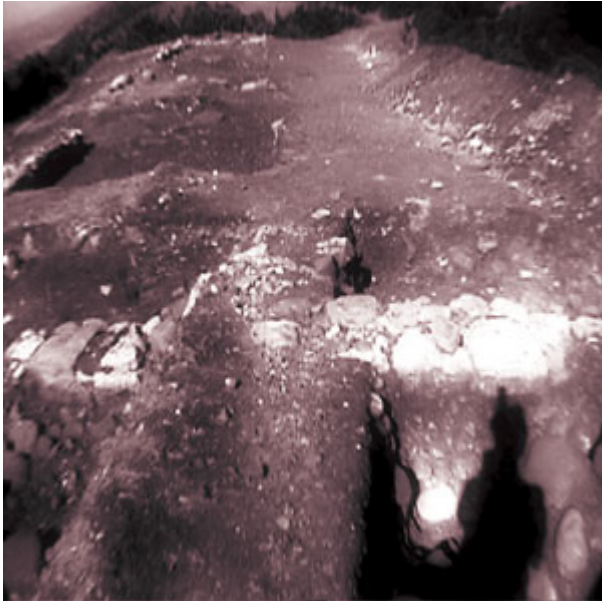


SHAM ARCHAEOLOGICAL SCIENCE IN THE ACADEMY



[Glasgow TAG conference – the cows come home to Monte Polizzo.](#)

A few years ago now I left I field project in Sicily after just two seasons.

I was very angry because I felt I had been forced out by people who didn't want to listen to my concerns. Angry at my wasted effort, because I had put two years of preparation into the project.

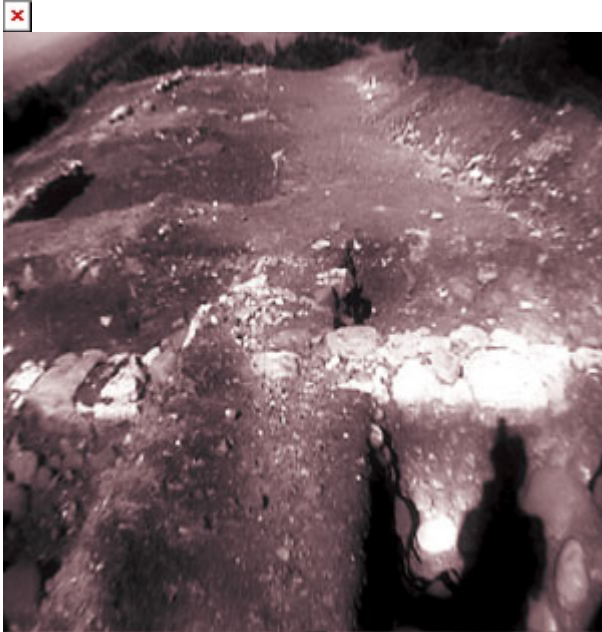
But this is just what sometimes happens with academics who get very committed to their ideas and are not the disinterested intellectuals we might imagine.

I was particularly concerned about the way some of my colleagues were prejudging the site we were excavating. They knew what they were going to find before they even began. They would tell visitors the story of the site on a hill top in the west of the island and contemporary with Greek and Phoenician cities before any serious analysis had been done.

I came to see their so-called field science as a sham.

Cliff (McLucas) and I even made a satirical video diary about it all (letting off

steam).



Monte Polizzo – video diary – June 1999

I urged, insisted that we be more neutral, more scientific. What came to be very tense argument centered upon the way we were categorizing what we were finding. Never mind the way I was trying to organize the way we were thinking of the artifacts we were finding – keeping it open and provisional until we could be more certain of what was going on. Some of it was as simple as the words they used to describe what was turning up.

Excavation began with what was clearly an incomplete structure – much had been destroyed by the forestry authorities opening up tracks over the site. But the structure was designated “House 1”, from the beginning. I said that we didn’t know it was a house, and that the term carried too many assumptions of function and meaning (the home, the domestic etc). We didn’t at the beginning even know which was the inside and which the outside. I was told that the name didn’t mean anything. Not even when our excavation manager announced to a meeting of townspeople the next year that we had found a “villa”. This was just to please the locals I was told – you have to hype it up, you know.

They were calling pottery fine and coarse, when I was pointing out that some of the so-called coarse pottery was technically more sophisticated than the fine imported wares.

They were using Greek terms for pottery and areas of the settlement when the site wasn't Greek and we didn't know anything about the layout.

They were calling the people who lived at Monte Polizzo Elimians, because a Greek historian mentioned such a people, and even when we are actively debating the meaning of such ethnic and cultural naming.

They told me that this was all just convention and we should stick to disciplinary conventions. Well yes, I had spent twenty years finding fault with such conventions and assumptions.

Because such conventions can blind us to what we are finding.

Here in Glasgow I have just listened to a paper about Monte Polizzo.

This is how the author presents it in the synopsis.

This paper aims at exploring ways of investigating the relationship between humans and animals in the household context. Humans and animals are perceived as living in a shared embeddedness, inhabiting a shared life-space. The proximity and relatedness between humans and animals is articulated through the material culture, which is laden with a biographical significance stemming from the intertwined human-animal practice. The flow of the household is a spatial concept ...

Yes – the paper was about House 1, now fixed as a household, with bits of animals all over the place. This is argued to mean that animals were intimate with people – in the domestic household.

This is exactly what I was warning against. Predetermining what we are interested

in and then having to explain what is actually of our own making. I am a little ashamed to say that hearing this brought back a lot of that old anger. Not least because serious researchers are devoting themselves to this falsehood.

I want to put aside the anger. But it does reemphasize what I was saying about teaching archaeology.

I believe we have to equip our graduates with the skills to spot this sham science.