

# Archaeology to live in the future<sup>1</sup>

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“WITH MY EYES closed I see a river with water running in both directions, and it occurs to me that this archaeology you speak of does not tell stories about the past, but about the future” (Carelli, 2021, p.122, original in Portuguese). This is how Ana – the teenage daughter of an archaeologist working on a *terra preta* site in the Xingu region- *perceives* this way of seeing the world that is archaeology. The thoughts of Ana, a character in Rita Carelli’s novel, connect and merge with the kind of archaeology practiced in Amazonia today. The discipline occupies a relevant place in the daily lives of people living in the region and has generated a kind of knowledge capable of contributing to saving not only the past, but also the future; of Amazonia, and of the planet. In the words of Indigenous archaeologist Jaime Xamen Wai Wai (Rodrigues; Kater; Xamen Wai Wai, 2020, p.117, original in Portuguese): “archaeology is everything”. The association of Amazonian archaeology with contemporary challenges – necropolitics, the Covid-19 pandemic, the demarcation of traditional territories, environmental licensing, greenwashing, biodiversity, the Anthropocene, the time frame tied to Indigenous lands, among others – is attested in academic production, in debate forums, and even through media communication tools that increase its visibility. Decades ago, the search for the term “Amazonian archaeology” would have resulted in a few articles about scientific research in the region, but they would be joined by a significant volume of fanciful elaborations generally drawing from discourses mixing evolutionary ideas of the nineteenth century with the imagination that surrounds the discipline outside academia. This *bricolage*, appropriated in recent times by science deniers and supporters of conspiracy theories, acts in a perverse way against the people who live in the forest, intensifying hatred and inciting violence from external agents in Indigenous and traditional territories.<sup>2</sup> As a counterpoint to this type of dissemination, the first results of digital searches for information about Amazonian archaeology today offer reports on archaeological studies in the region, mostly interviews, filming, photographs, texts by archaeologist Eduardo Goés Neves, the current director of the Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia (Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology – MAE) at the Universidade de São Paulo (University of São Paulo - USP), and the author of *Sob os Tempos do Equinócio: oito mil anos de história na Amazônia Central* (*Under the Times of the Equinox: Eight Thousand Years of History in the Central Amazon*), a book edited in Portuguese by Ubu Editora in partnership with Editora da USP and released in 2022. The first record that appears on the search pages today is another book about Amazonian archaeology, written by the same author, and published in

2006 as part of the collection “Descobrimos o Brasil” (Discovering Brazil), directed by Celso Castro, and which aimed at presenting Brazilian themes to a broader audience (Neves, 2006). These two books share affinities that go beyond authorship: they speak of a pulsating archaeology, a deep Indigenous history, and allow the past, present and future of the Amazonian region to converge. All this is done in an accessible language, even though the two publications – in editorial terms – have different natures. Taking care of the form of writing in/of science is a gesture towards the socialization of a kind of knowledge that needs to reach many people, collectives and corners of a society sickened by the hateful construction of Otherness. In *Sob os Tempos do Equinócio*, Eduardo Neves seeks to communicate with different readers, and does so not only with stylistic mastery, but with the intelligibility of someone possessing a vigorous theoretical and methodological framework in archaeology and about the Amazon. The book is the updated result of his *Livre-Docência* [Professor habilitation] thesis defended in 2013 at the USP, and tells the story of the long-term occupation of a region that Neves dedicated himself to studying for almost two decades: Central Amazonia. Despite emphasizing this context, the data generated by the research conducted there – within the scope of the Projeto Amazônia Central (Central Amazon Project – PAC) – appears useful to reflect on the sociocultural dynamics that moved populations, ideas and materials in the lowlands of South America. The book resumes debates that have marked the history of Amazonian archaeology since the mid-twentieth century. It provides a critical overview of the adoption or abandonment of concepts and theories, which, throughout the course of the discipline, have provoked fierce debates and often resulted in dualisms that Neves was committed to overcome throughout his career, such as those around *agricultural determinism*,<sup>3</sup> *terra preta* sites, the use of the integrative concept of archaeological phases, as well as different critiques of historical culturalism. Regarding the latter, the researcher states that it constitutes a “silent paradigm still present” (p.42)<sup>4</sup> in Brazilian archaeology which remains interesting due to its proximity to the field of History. Certainly, doing archaeology in Amazonia means studying long-term Indigenous history, not to mention the history of traditional communities known by archaeology when working in more recent contexts. These stories substantiate a temporal magnitude of 12,000 years and take place on a late occupied continent, which remained isolated until the sixteenth century CE [Common Era]. The historical processes carried out over a few thousand years gave rise to the sociocultural diversity that we know through archaeology. For this reason, Neves reminds his readers that ancient Amazonia can be approached as a laboratory in which theories that were successful in other contexts do not apply to what happened in the region. An example is the relationship between domestication and agriculture, which in the Amazon do not constitute interdependent moments following each other. Likewise, the existence of chiefdoms there did not imply the adoption of the State model and, in the specific case of central Amazonia, there is evidence of a lithic projec-

tile point industry associated not with the Pleistocene, but with the Early Holocene. The detailed description of the stratigraphic history of the sites – some in particular – as well as the methodological strategies for their understanding, make one of the book’s chapters a lesson in field archaeology and resulted in the observation of useful indicators for understanding other sites in the region. In this sense, Neves’ proposal, discussed in one of his most thought-provoking articles entitled “Is there a Brazilian archaeology?”, that we stop looking for external theoretical and methodological solutions and make “the opposite movement: that of a deep dive into the evidence that has been found” (Neves, 2015, p.9, original in Portuguese) was truly taken seriously by the researcher. His studies attest that Central Amazonia was occupied from eight thousand years ago, and the sites he and his collaborators researched point to the fact that while there was a significant demographic density at one point in time, at others, evidence indicates a drastic population reduction. Whatever the size of the populations that lived in the central region, and throughout broader Amazonia, they left their marks on the materials produced, but also on the landscapes, which appears as their most admirable distinctive feature. Archaeology has revealed/recognized the ingenuity and virtuosity of the ancestors of present-day Indigenous peoples. They moved volumes of earth (moats, wells, ditches, paths, mounds, embankments, geoglyphs), stones (megaliths), domesticated plant species (some of which we still eat today: cassava, rice, peach palm, pineapple, beans, etc.), produced art (sculptures, rock painting and engraving, ceramic iconography). Furthermore, the intensification of their occupations made the soils more fertile (known as “*terra preta*” or “anthropogenic soils”). Some of these transformations and creations are materialized in many of the almost 100 sites registered by the PAC. This knowledge would already be enough to undo the discourse about the supposed inferiority of Indigenous peoples, but the archaeological work practiced by Neves has gone further and demonstrated – guided by the principles and debates of Historical Ecology – that, contrary to the publicized scarcity of resources, societies who lived in ancient Amazonia “managed abundance” (Neves, 2007, original in Spanish). There were many people, many resources, many alternating ways of life, many occupied territories, much artefactual variability, many ways of *inhabiting* the landscapes (Ingold, 1993). When looking at this picture, we see affluence and excess. I draw from Marisol de La Cadena’s work (2010) to use this idea of excess. Although she deals with Indigenous agency in the present, it is conceivable to think about Indigenous protagonism from the standpoint of ancient Amazonia. In order to better understand this history, Eduardo Neves engages in a dialogue with the ethnology of Amazonian Lowlands and, through this encounter, provides fertile paths for Archaeology and Indigenous Ethnology, one of the fields of study in which the researcher moves, always showing that Archaeology is not a discipline that only deals with the past, but making us think about how it circulates through places, times and knowledge. The book is organized into seven sections (intro-

duction, five chapters and conclusion) and includes maps and photos of the material repertoire collected at Central Amazonia sites. The publication fills a gap in Amazonian archaeology by presenting a synthesis written in Portuguese about research in one of the most important areas in the region – located at the confluence of the three largest rivers in the Amazon basin – and which serves to formulate hypotheses about other Amazonian contexts. *Sob os Tempos do Equinócio* does not just talk about the past, but looks at the present at every moment. This arises both from Neves’ commitment to Amazonian peoples and from the scientific, historical and political impossibility of doing archaeology in the Amazon without thinking about the present. The author highlights the importance of the discipline in debates about the Anthropocene (Crutzen; Stoermer, 2000), in particular, studies aimed at understanding the relationships between people and Amazonian landscapes. Adriana Adbenur and colleagues (2020, p.1) state that the knowledge produced by archaeology about environmental management in the past could be used in such a way that “lessons from the past could help the Amazon recover in the future”, benefiting the global community and sustainability. It is also unthinkable to look at the past and lose sight of the fact that people in the Amazon live on archaeological sites, they *live in archaeological sites*, thereby persisting with the ancient practice of reoccupying places. Such practice, observed since the ancient Amazonian times, is perceptible in the ways Amazonian cities are based on ancient villages, which Neves illustrates through the examples of Santarém, Manaus and others. In the Central Amazon, as throughout the Amazon region, people collect archaeological artifacts<sup>5</sup> and maintain memorial and affectionate relationships with these ancient Indigenous materials (Bianchezzi et al., 2021). Living together and listening to the ways of seeing the world of Indigenous and traditional peoples have destabilized concepts with which the discipline has operated for centuries – such as sites, traces, time – causing transformations in the practice of archaeology (Cabral, 2015; 2022; Gomes, 2021) and archaeology conducted in the region has contributed substantially to this debate. The access of Indigenous, *Quilombola*, and *Ribeirinho* students and communities to archaeology training courses is cited by Neves as one of the shifts that have changed perspectives about the discipline in the Amazon. At the beginning of the book, Eduardo Neves states that “archaeology studies phenomena of the present” (p.8), since sites and other remains would have “traveled through time” in order to reach today (p.11). This reminds me of a thought expressed by the Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak on the concept of “remote”. When telling a story in which the “remote” category had been used as a reference to the Indigenous territory *Vale do Javari*, he says: “I usually note that remote is always about the other, remote is never about us. So, I am never in a remote place” (Moreira, 2022, p.6, original in Portuguese). This is the kind of archaeology that Eduardo Neves brings *Sob os Tempos do Equinócio*, it is never remote because it deals with a history that began thousands of years ago, but which continues to be written by

the people who live in the Amazon, by the people and activist groups who fight for social and environmental justice, by archaeologists like him, who through their research have revealed unknown parts of this long Indigenous history, while leaving a set of data and theories that constitute an important archive, not only for History, but for the people of the forest, too. At the moment we live in, with debates surrounding the illogical “time frame” of Indigenous rights to territory, archaeology has a lot to contribute, whether with a “no” (Rocha, 2023, original in Portuguese), or through the production of evidence that indisputably declares that the ancestors of Indigenous peoples left deep marks on the land, in the rivers, in the forests, in the Amazon Forest. More than traces, they constitute repositories of knowledge produced by people who managed, for thousands of years, as Neves shows, to live in a creative, diverse and sustainable way. It is a lesson from the past that can guide us to a better life. Yes, Ana, this archaeology that Eduardo Neves talks about is also an archaeology of the future.

## Notes

- 1 Translated by G. Omoni Hartemann. Ilê Axé Iyaba Omi, Belém, Pará, Brazil and PhD Candidate at the Department of Anthropology, Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (Federal University of Minas Gerais - UFMG).
- 2 The same phenomenon occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic when the production of fake news threatened vaccination in Indigenous territories. See <https://acervo.socioambiental.org/acervo/noticias/fake-news-impacta-na-decisao-de-indigenas-sobre-tomar-vacina>.
- 3 Regarding this topic, see Claide Moraes (2015)
- 4 Reference taken from the e-book version
- 5 The legislation that protects archaeological heritage prohibits this type of practice, which, however, is common among Amazonian communities.

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