CONFERENCE REVIEW

"Archaeology 2008" Conference, The British Museum, London, 9th and 10th February 2008

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The tone of this conference was egalitarian from the start, when Andrew Selkirk, the editor-in-chief of *Current Archaeology* magazine introduced it as a "festival" of celebration. Held at the British Museum on 9th and10th February 2008, hosted by *Current Archaeology* (and *Current World Archaeology*) and co-sponsored by *The Traveller* and The British Museum's own Department of Portable Antiquities and Treasure (Portable Antiquities Scheme), the conference was self-consciously outward-looking. It was designed to avoid over-specialisation and to appeal to a wider audience of amateurs and professionals alike. Over the course of two days, 60 papers were given in two separate lecture theatres on themes arranged culturally (e.g. "Treasures of the Celts"), geographically (e.g. "Asia, Africa, and the Americas"), by time (e.g. "Reading the Stones"), by technique (e.g. "The New Radiocarbon Revolution"), and even speculation ("The Future of the Past").

From one perspective it seemed to be conceived as a reward for loyal *Current Archaeology* readers, a place where they would be presented with the most recent research in what amounted to real time documentaries, rather than a forum of rigorous academic cross-examination. Yet this eclectic arrangement of papers did coalesce around two significant messages which most of the attendees could not have failed to miss. Firstly, that British archaeologists are successfully conducting important research around the globe by embracing new technologies and theories within the field, and that their work is all the more relevant because they refuse to operate according to the status quo. This was characterised by a 'sceptical' positivism among many of the discussants, who sought to demonstrate the validity of their research while at the same time acknowledging that future findings could refute it. The message was also noticeable in their willingness to abandon the role of the omniscient foreign scientist and to admit that local inhabitants can make equally worthwhile contributions to our archaeological understanding of a site.

This leads to the second point, buried just beneath the surface of some papers and specifically highlighted in others, that Archaeology as a discipline suffers from an imbalanced relationship between the professionals and the amateurs. There were calls from more than a few of the speakers for the two groups to work in closer cooperation and for academics in particular to descend from their 'ivory towers' and acknowledge the significant role that interested laypeople can play in increasing the depth of archaeological knowledge. This in turn was part of the wider message that any optimism associated with the future of Archaeology has to be dependent on its ability to accept its relative place in the world economy, and that it must learn to take advantage of the resources and opportunities at its disposal. If anything, then, the legacy of

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this conference will be in its clarion call to professional and amateur archaeologists to embrace potential partnerships, or rather, to break down barriers inside and around archaeology, and not to shirk change. Due to the wide range of topics covered in the various sessions and to the logistical constraints which forced me to choose selectively which ones I would attend, this review will focus on several of the papers which best illustrated these themes. I should also mention by way of disclaimer that I am employed at the British Museum as the Treasure Registrar and work very closely with my colleagues in the Portable Antiquities Scheme.

The Saturday morning session entitled "Rethinking Roman Britain" wasted little time in introducing several critical issues to the conference by means of taking a seemingly well known time period and demonstrating how much more we have to learn about it. For although, as the session moderator Simon James (University of Leicester) noted, "Britain is the best studied province in the Roman Empire", a recent revolution in the study of Romano-British archaeology has changed our understanding of concepts such as the ancient landscape and the nature of imperialism. For instance, in the paper "In the Shadow of the Colossus", Miles Russell (Bournemouth University) noted that the interpretation of existing archaeological evidence surrounding the Claudian invasion of Britain had traditionally been made to reinforce the meagre and vague historical accounts. Rather than search for the conclusive invasion site, does it not make more sense, he asked, to re-examine the material that does exist, including a Latin-inscribed plaque to a possible client-king? This new research could lead to a completely new concept of the political state of Britain in AD 43; instead of a hostile territory being suddenly overwhelmed by several legions, perhaps there existed a pro-Roman leader in the south who softened up resistance to foreign influence and made possible the slow build-up of more Roman troops.

Such theorising is vital in reconsidering aspects of the past for which records are scarce. Luckily, the amount of archaeological data is increasing, but it now has a tendency to come from non-traditional sources or to have been initiated for non-academic motives. The interpretation of this information and its practical application in terms of creating a coherent concept of the past is in the hands of many of the speakers at this conference. In his paper "Reconstructing Hadrian's Wall: a New View of the Northern Frontier", Nick Hodgson (Tyne & Wear Museums) emphasised the harsh economic reality of archaeological research; that it is becoming more expensive and is increasingly developer driven, rather than academically initiated. This is especially true in the redeveloped areas of older cities, which are routinely subject to rescue archaeology, as noted by Neil Faulkner (Bristol University and *Current Archaeology*) in his introduction to the session "Archaeology of Modern Cities". Indeed, archaeologists are often dependent on the occupier's decision to rebuild in order to gain access to a site. When that time comes, however, valuable insights can be made into a city's ancient and recent past (cf. Milne 1992; Schofield 1999) which were conveyed in papers on York and Birmingham given by Peter Conolly (York Archaeological Trust) and Mike Hodder (Birmingham City Council) respectively.

As a joint sponsor of the conference, it was expected that the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) would have a major presence among the papers, and this was indeed the case. Adam Daubney (Finds Liaison Officer for Lincolnshire) and Philippa Walton (PhD student at University College London and the British Museum) revealed in separate talks the incredible research potential created by the work of the PAS over the last decade. The PAS's major effort has been to record, through voluntary reporting by the public, all archaeological finds made throughout the country onto an online database. The PAS has come under criticism from some academics who see its tacit endorsement of metal-detecting as detrimental to the archaeological record, although the benefits of working with hobbyists and laypeople are not easily ignored. Daubney's research into Roman 'ToT' rings, thought to be associated with a military/veteran cult of Northern Europe, has been enabled by the discovery of several of these examples by detectorists and their reporting through the PAS. Walton's ambitious doctoral thesis, out of which her paper arose, strives to make geographic sense of the thousands of smaller distributions of Roman coins throughout the country. She pointed out that the coins on the PAS database painted a much different picture of Romano-British settlement patterns than the large collections coming from previously known military, urban and villa sites.

Both authors reinforced the position of the chief architect of the PAS's database, Dan Pett. His excellent paper, "Archaeological Data and the Web: Changing the Past and the Future", emblemised the spirit of the conference; it was geared towards the mixed audience in that it avoided complex terminology and outlined the structure of the database and examples of the results it has so far produced. He also explained that the very purpose of the PAS is not only to make use of publicly generated research, but also to incorporate it into a sensible format that in turn would make all of the data available to everyone, or as he phrased it, "the simple reuse of free data". In this case, that means putting the information on the Internet, at www.finds.org.uk.

However, this is not the only way in which Archaeology makes use of the non-traditional data, a point emphasised by the conflict archaeologists Nicholas Saunders (University of Bristol) and Martin Brown (Defence Estates). In their individual presentations they outlined the usefulness of gathering information for their research using an interdisciplinary approach – from first-person testimonials to aerial photographs to the study of material culture. An extreme example of the co-opting of resources not originally intended for archaeological research was offered by Vincent Gaffney (University of Birmingham) in his paper "The Rediscovery of Europe's Lost Country: Doggerland". Most of the scientific information which he and his team used to create a map of the ancient fluvial landscape buried under the North Sea came from bathymetry and seismic readings acquired by a large natural gas concern.

To make an impact an impact on a conference, speakers must judge the leanings of their audience correctly, but they should also take a clear stance on a potentially divisive issue and back it up appropriately. The themes outlined above appeared in a group of talks which I felt tackled the critical relationship between the subject of Archaeology

and its practitioners, and which taken together presented a consensus opinion on the future direction of the discipline. David Miles (English Heritage) warned against a growing divide amongst archaeological specialists and between academics and the public, and Julian Richards (Independent researcher) in his keynote speech urged professionals and amateurs to put aside their differences and work together.

The practical example of how to achieve this was offered by Roger Bland (British Museum) who held up the PAS as a model of this sought after partnership, citing a plethora of statistics that demonstrated the database's popularity among the public and usefulness to researchers. This rational approach providing the figures to reinforce the 'feel-good' reports, has been characteristic of Bland's tireless and ultimately successful campaigning to secure the necessary funding for the continued operation of the PAS. It was the greatest fear of Gabriel Moshenska (Leverhulme Postdoctoral Research Fellow) that the tenuous trust established between the hobbyists and professionals would come crashing down with the threat of closure of the PAS and that the relationship would be worse than if the Scheme had never functioned at all. As a simple framework for meeting the objectives called for by Miles and Richards, Bland and Moshenska urged archaeologists to follow examples of existing good practice, such as the PAS, and to encourage anyone interested in the subject to "get their hands dirty" by joining local organisations, exercising their right to dig, and "ignoring experts who tell you that you can't do what you're already doing".

It is the connections created through such activities which encourage a shared sense of value for our past heritage and a desire to see it experienced by everyone. This in turn enables an environment in which an organisation like the Metropolitan Police's "Art Beat" squad can achieve success in tracking down offenders of antiquities laws. Michael Lewis (British Museum and Metropolitan Police) explained that the monopolisation of heritage, as manifested in the use of the antiques trade to support banal and criminal activity, is best combated from both sides of the professional divide. As I see it, the sooner that paid practitioners demonstrate their trust and respect for their lay counterparts, the easier it will be to present a united front to curb the trade in illicit antiquities.

Given the audience for this conference it was not surprising that the removal of barriers, whether theoretical or social, was seen as essential to the future relevance of Archaeology, and indeed that much of the significant research being carried out around the globe by British scholars was attributable to the new possibilities thereby created. Miles half-joked that there was a danger of archaeology being swamped under a deluge of data. Yet various forms of data being compiled, organised and analysed by amateurs and professionals in cooperation can only be a positive thing; as Trigger points out, though an objective 'truth' about the past may be impossible to reach, misinterpretations of it can be steadily eliminated (Trigger 2006: 484). If the techniques and methods presented in this conference are performing that function, they are serving the field well. And that is certainly a cause for "celebration".

References

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