

Archaeology, Antiquities, and Taste

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The development of Antiquarian activity in the 18th century is frequently seen as a period of regression, stagnation, and romantic 'diversion' which departs from the solid, scholarly traditions of historical analysis developed in the late 17th century; it ends with the inception of Scientific archaeology in the 19th, marked by the widespread adoption of the Three Age System and the impact of biological and geological evolutionary thought. Piggott has developed this idea most fully, and offers a penetrating analysis of the period in his essay, "Ruins in a Landscape" (Piggott, 1976). Indeed, he attempts to pinpoint precisely the chronological boundaries of the great era of Antiquarianism, giving 1730 and 1830 as tentative opening and closing dates. He sees the career of William Stukeley as particularly significant in that it presents a very sharp break between objective fieldwork and restrained speculative thought on the one hand, and self-indulgent fancy (used to feed the fire of religious controversy) on the other. Stukeley's pre-1725 work on Avebury and Stonehenge is seen to derive from the sober and scholarly traditions of the 17th century, while the later speculative works on Druids and Patriarchal religion are considered innovative and wildly romantic.

The 'problem' of 18th century Antiquarianism is, therefore, generally seen to lie in explaining how the empirical Baconian traditions exemplified by Aubrey and Lhuys remained still-born, or were stifled. This is usually ascribed to an influx of irrelevant social and aesthetic factors (in a word 'Romanticism') which created a Dark Age of folly and self-indulgent fancy. Before outlining the body of my analysis, I will briefly give my own position in relation to this classic 'consensus'. The distinctive opposition of scientific activity, conceived as enlarging a body of knowledge through widely accepted and rigorous methodological procedures, and Antiquarianism, with its emphasis on objets d'art, excavation as a pleasurable activity, and direct, subjective, aesthetic links between the past and the present, seems substantially valid. However, I would contend that Antiquarianism is much more interesting and significant than this dichotomy would seem to allow. I would like to stress the intensely 'sociable' nature of this activity, and the fact that, with landscape-gardening, painting, poetry, and speculative thought, it formed a tightly-knit body of ideas constantly in the forefront of religious and political controversy.

There is a contrast between the tightly-knit, narrow language of Romantic Antiquarianism, and the great diversity with which it was used by specific antiquarians; it does not seem that we have here a Romantic ideology rigidly conditioning their thought and interpretations. To take an example from the close of the period, one indicating the submerged survival of Antiquarian activity in a proto-Archaeological context: Colt-Hoare's intense interest in Landscape gardening, the picturesquely antique spelling of the title page of "Ancient

Wiltshire", and the direct association of Cunnington with Britton's best-selling "Beauties of Britain" all emphasise that single individuals might espouse the most diverse, and apparently contradictory, viewpoints.

It may well be useful to define what is meant by Antiquarianism before tracing the development of certain concepts from the 17th to the 18th centuries. The term is generally used rather loosely, and in a negative sense, to describe any interest in the past which does not conform to modern standards of scientific methodology; or to refer to those who, while professing aims similar to 20th century scholars, were incapable of putting them into comprehensive practice. Thus, while most of the contributions to the first twenty years of Archaeologia might be taken as unadulterated Antiquarianism, the approach stated in the introduction to the first volume¹ hardly differs from Colt-Hoare's claim that we "speak from facts, not theory", quoted by Piggott (Piggott 1976) to indicate the change in intellectual climate at the end of the century. The latter definition of Antiquarians as proto-archaeologists -- rather muddled and confused, and hindered by lack of secure chronology from putting their, quite valid, insights into practice -- is much more applicable to the 17th than to the 18th century: scholars such as Lhuyd attempted to answer specific questions in the light of the material available, as did the scientist/archaeologists of the 19th century. However, the Romantic Antiquarians were often interested in the material remains of the past divorced from any coherent framework of historical interpretation and emphatically stressed this dislocation. Instead, the link between the past and present was forged through solitary meditation and communal 'taste', short-cutting any reference to problems of cultural classification, dating, and so on. Furthermore, I would contend that Romantic Antiquarianism is much less amenable to an ideological exposé in terms of the 'Sociology of Knowledge' than the work of the preceding and succeeding periods, during which some attempt was made to reconstruct an objective image of the past which would be serviceable for contemporary ends. That past was conceived of as being different and distinct from the present, and it had to be 'known' and classified objectively; the power and authority of interpretations consequently depended on their acceptability in an established consensus of scholarly opinion and upon their methodological rigour. Rival interpreters each claimed greater fidelity to what 'really' had gone on in the past, constantly invoking the idea of an objectively known and historically distinct past. The transition from the Picturesque Gothic of the late 18th century, with its eclectic assortment of diverse historical and regional styles, can be strikingly contrasted with the rise of ecclesiology in the 19th century, with its detailed concern over the exact reproduction of mediaeval models, in which the moral authority of the past is grounded in faithful knowledge of what 'really' went on.

On the other hand, Romantic Antiquarianism made no such claims, or made them sparingly: little attempt was made to back up controversy through empirical research;² instead the past was related directly to the present through notions of taste and sensibility, particularly the

isolated individual meditating far from the concourse of normal human activity. These approaches to the past form a closely knit complex of activities and ideas which one might tentatively label 'Romantiquarianism'. Despite the lack of interest in building a coherent historical framework for prehistoric antiquities, and a consequent use of an 'objective' image of the past to legitimate present social practices, there do seem to be certain correlations between 'Romantiquarianism' and political and religious controversy, notably: 1) the development of notions of national identity; 2) the more thorny and central problem of the conceptualisation of the relationship between Man and Nature -- and this has explicit religious import.

The development of interest in the peculiarities of specific regions and their intrinsic worth is a notable feature of the 17th century and of earlier Antiquarians. It must be stressed that Aubrey and Camden made no strict separation of historical features from biological, geological, and other local peculiarities. Indeed, there is a strong functional bias towards the listing of natural resources (with, on the other hand, quite explicit accounts of local aristocratic genealogies) as if they desired to produce a comprehensive social and 'natural' map of the British Isles. The aesthetic element so evident in the Itineraries of the 18th and early 19th centuries, which culminates in Britton's "Beauties" (Britton 1801-15), seems lacking. There is, however, some attention paid to local 'curiosities' in the works of Lhuyd and Aubrey which seem more directly parallel to the later period. These interests take two forms: 1) they can simply be accounts of regional hallmarks; 2) on the other hand, they are sometimes prompted by an interest in the 'curious' as that which cannot easily be fitted into current categories of explanation, the very interest lying in the strangeness of the object concerned. It is in this category that we find petrifying springs and natural freaks, both of which can be related to a contemporary interest in the 'exotick', witness the 'Cabinets of Curiosities' which often contained monsters, natural freaks, and so on. This fascination with items which did not fit into received intellectual schemes, and which confused the boundaries of the human and natural world, is of interest when considering the development of 'Romantiquarianism' which also deliberately emphasised the allure and mystery of the unknown.³

Such interest in local geography may be correlated with the emergence of a strong national myth rooted in the idea of the long historical continuity of English culture, and the venerable and benevolent authority of the ancient past. This myth played a large part in defining ideas of the British, their nature and destiny as a race. It is accompanied by an ambiguous attitude towards the Romans and the 'Classical Idea' which was already evident in Beaumont and Fletcher's "Bonduca"⁴, where Druids and sacrificial rites are associated in a fashion that was to recur throughout the century. This conflict of ideology and values is more noticeable in the work of Dryden, who often used exotic mises-en-scene (Peru, Mexico, and so on), deliberately stressing the exotic setting through elaborate staging. These settings

correspond with an emphasis on barbaric virtue, rugged independence, and the simple life, all associated in a coherent fashion and all providing a blueprint for the desired English national characteristics. They are explicitly associated with patriotism on the one hand, and Druidic rites on the other.⁵ This whole complex of ideas is directly in contrast with the contemporary and courtly neo-classical French drama, with its much greater reliance on classical sources and direct didactic edification. It will be noted that the problem of continuity in the face of evident historical invasions is also raised in 'King Arthur', by the Saxon-Briton conflict, and that this motif remained significant along with the 'Roman Problem' well on into the 18th century.

The kind of national virtues emphasised by Dryden were also well brought out by Milton during his short-lived, though intense, interest in Druidism. In his address to Parliament on "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce", he advocates radical reform and claims innovativeness as a typical British feature going back to the Druidic past:⁶

"It would not be the first, or second time since our ancient Druids, by whom this Island was the Cathedrall of Philosophy to France, left off their pagan rites, that England hath had this honour vouchsaf'd from heaven, to give out reformation to the world",

and he later notes the "quick and piercing spirit of the Nation, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the highest that human capacity can soar to".⁷

I hope this manages to convey some idea of the development of an image of national identity throughout the 17th century, the significant features may be summarised as follows: 1) British Antiquity is seen to be distinctive and not fundamentally dependent on foreign borrowings; 2) it is felt to be possible to trace continuity of highly desirable characteristics into the distant past; 3) these qualities are of a specific type: they stress innovation, independence, local initiative, and religious and political liberty; 4) Britain's decisive qualities are such that she is eminently suited to "give out reformation to the rest of the world". These ideas form a set of concepts which recur throughout the 18th century; however, it should be stressed that no homogeneous formulation was ever widely accepted, and the tension between these, and more orthodox neo-classical ideals, can well be illustrated by investigating various literary attempts to solve the 'Roman Problem'.

Throughout the 18th century the opposition between Roman invaders and Ancient Britons was dramatised from a number of conflicting viewpoints. Naturally, the resolute independence and patriotism of the Druids was stoutly emphasised and forms one of the central features of the 'Druid Complex' in 18th century Antiquarianism. The sympathetic approach is concisely put by Thomas Warton (Warton 1802:125) at the end of the century:

What native genius taught the Britons bold
 To guard their sea-girt cliffs of old?
 'Twas Liberty: she taught disdain
 Of Death, of Rome's imperial chain.
 She bade the Druid harp to sound.

Note the characteristic association of "native genius" with individual freedom, distinctive national/political institutions, and the hint at maritime power in "sea-girt cliffs". This reference to the growth of naval supremacy can be traced in earlier 18th century poetry: T. Dyer, one of the major landscape poets, wrote eulogies on the British Wool Trade (Dyer 1757), and "Rule Britannia" first appeared in a dramatic masque on the life of King Alfred (Thomson 1740). However, it is only fair to add that the more orthodox view of the Romans as bearers of civilisation was championed by such notable figures as Hearne and Gibbon.

Pope's unfinished drama on the supposed invasion by Brutus is a notable instance of the contradictions present and the possibilities of reconciling conflicting approaches. Here, Brutus is seen as the selfless dispenser of culture to the Barbarian world, with the aim of "of extending benevolence, and polishing and teaching Nations".⁸ On his arrival in Britain there is no clash between the invaders and the native Druids, who welcome him with open arms, recognising the purity of Brutus' motives, and eagerly accepting the proffered benefits of order, good government, and polished manners. An uneasy compromise between native independency and socially accepted standards of civilisation, was thus effected. However, the theme of Druidic patriotism remained very much alive throughout the century, notably in Mason's "Caractacus"⁹ and Cowper's "Boadicea".¹⁰ The latter takes an extreme anti-Roman view in which the Roman Empire is seen as an ephemeral precursor of the infinitely greater British Empire. It is, perhaps, significant that Pope depicted the submission of the Ancient Britons in terms of the predicted destiny of the British Nation as the bearer of civilised life, Christianity, and Freedom, in its imperial enterprises.

The part of Antiquarianism in religious controversy also broaches on Nationalism. The Anglican Church, as the bearer of Christian civilisation, required a more venerable and ancient pedigree than the simple historical contingencies of the Reformation: hence the well-known attempts by Stukeley to root Anglican orthodox Trinitarianism in Druidic lore.¹¹ The link between Druids, and 'Patriarchal Religion' was made very frequently in the 18th century and culminates in Blake's assertion that England was indeed the Holy Land, the cradle of Christendom.¹²

Much of the material discussed above is purely literary, and it can be argued that specific Antiquarian activities had little effect on the literary manifestations of 'Romantiquarianism', and that the latter's fashionable presentation in Art and speculative thought did not encourage Antiquarians to tackle specific problems. However, there appears to be a partial exception to this divorce between speculative

thought and activity in the form of 'cultural classification', to which Antiquarians devoted much time and trouble: the problem of assigning specific monuments to their appropriate people. Stonehenge is a classic example. The relevance of this to the tracing of National Identity should be self-evident. Moreover, this kind of ethnic debate is clearly related to the prolonged linguistic controversies on the affinities and origins of English. The attempts to minimise the break between the Celts and the Saxons is, perhaps, responsible for the great reluctance with which scholars abandoned the notion that English had a strong Celtic component -- though the evidence for the Germanic affinities of the language had long been known.

Significantly, this is the aspect of Antiquarianism which proved most long-lived and detachable from its 18th century romantic context; and it plays an important part in the work of Cunnington and Colt-Hoare, leading on directly to the development of cultural history in the 19th and 20th centuries. In summary, Romantic Antiquarianism seems closely linked to the formation of a National Ideal, not without ambiguities and inconsistencies, and a capacity for diverse interpretation.

We now turn to notions of the 'Picturesque', and their role in Antiquarian activity. The floreat of topographical poetry throughout the 18th century is closely connected with the stability and independence of the local gentry: the basic geographical unit of most topographical poems was the country estate. The genealogical eulogies and descriptions of benevolent, smoothly functioning paternalistic estates tend to disappear by the end of the 17th century, as do simple versified lists of possessions (Aubin 1936). Instead, particular description of landscapes leads directly into meditation on certain well-defined themes. There is therefore a direct link between nature and human meditation, though this is conceived in standard socially current forms. The type of 17th century Antiquarianism mentioned above stresses Man's active role in classifying and transforming a Natural World which is conceived of as distinct from the Human; whereas the Romanticists of the following century deliberately blurred the two through their utilisation of notions of the 'Picturesque'. Many of these developments were again specifically English in character.¹³

The 18th century country seat was part of an elaborately constructed landscape, constructed according to specific aesthetic theories; yet there was a deliberate attempt to negate any impression of active control and order, rather to create an 'artful disorder' in which human contrivance and natural irregularity were cunningly blended and paradoxically confused. A similar attempt was made to elide the Natural and the Human, through the practise of solitary 'contemplation' -- this is also relevant to religious controversy. Thus, the organisation of the picturesque garden could be deliberately designed to hide functional boundaries and utilitarian features, to integrate 'architecture' with landscape through the use of ha-has, hidden entrances, and so on. These devices might serve a fairly obvious function: to disguise the boundaries of a very small estate, or lend prestige through the use of

armoreal bearings. On a more general scale, however, the persistent interest in ruins testifies to the ambiguity of the nature/culture boundaries: for, while evident creations of Man, they could simultaneously be integrated aesthetically into a non-human landscape, with much emphasis placed on the 'mouldering' processes of decay.

The fact that the criteria of the 'picturesque' were so ambivalent can be related to the considerable stylistic diversity and rapid change throughout the century. Generally, one might say that the acceptable compromise between human-imposed order and the natural world veered gradually towards 'Nature', so that what is originally seen as acceptably natural very quickly becomes stereotyped, standardised, and contrived.¹⁴ It is also worth noting that picturesque principles were extensively reproduced, with a vast market for 'improvement', and considerable social rivalry and competition over the possession of aesthetically satisfying landscapes.

The tendency to elide the Human and Natural worlds can also be observed in contemporary aesthetic speculation. During the early part of the 18th century it was customary to explain aesthetic effects in terms of real and intrinsic natural properties. Burke's essay on the Sublime¹⁵ is the most famous example of this, but what is particularly interesting is his attempt to relate natural characteristics to invariant aspects of Human behaviour. Thus the 'Beautiful' is linked to the desire for self-propagation, and the 'Sublime' to self-preservation. Explicit definition and discussion of the 'Picturesque' does not occur until the end of the century, in the works of Knight, Price, and Repton, in an attempt to codify and justify contemporary practice. Knight, like Burke, saw the aesthetic quality of picturesqueness as rooted in natural, intrinsic qualities, such as irregularity, and roughness of texture, but he did not find a law of human nature to account for the appropriate 'affect'. The development of Associationism, notably by Allison, may seem a reflection of increasing subjectivity of aesthetic theory but, in fact, it reflects a move towards a more scientific, and Cartesian conception of the distinctness of Man and Nature, in which there is no way of invoking a natural order to explain social terms; rather, one has to take a behaviouristic and psychological approach. In general, the tendency towards explicit discussion of aesthetic theory, and the re-introduction of such antiquated concepts as formal gardens, marks the end of the radical phase of Landscape gardening and the development of discrete scientific specialisms, concerned with faithfully emulating a variety of mediaeval and classical precedents.

The part played by Antiquarianism in this complex of ideas is, I think, a passive one. There was little attempt to model follies on particular historical monuments, or faithfully to copy particular historical styles during the period of 'Picturesque' Gothicism; but then its prime significance was as an activity in which one came into direct contact with the remains of the past. We thus have a complex of closely related pursuits, closely involving the past, and incorporating its remains into the landscape, without there being any apparent need to

make it part of a coherent system of historical interpretation.¹⁶ However, the Romantics' meditative approach to the past, to prehistoric artefacts as objects dislocated from an historical context and put in direct contact with individuals who are separated from the ordinary round of social activity, has itself a direct import for human activity, and for modes of justifying action; and here one must move on to study the role of 'Nature' in religious controversy.

The involvement of Antiquarianism in religious controversy has long been pointed out (see, for example, (Piggott 1976)) as a particularly extravagant example of the Romantic nonsense and subjectivism of the period. However, the use of the pre-Roman past in sectarian controversy goes back well into the 17th century and continues after the close of the 18th. Stukeley found many sympathetic listeners and critical commentators who were prepared to take him seriously. Many of the issues involved went back to attempts to define the distinctive qualities of Anglicanism, and to post-Reformation attacks on excessive superstition and theocracy.¹⁷ The alternative view of the Druids as bearers of patriarchal religion is also significant, especially the diverse use to which the limited sources were put. Thus, Toland thought that the Druids were an excellent warning as to the danger of a politically powerful priesthood infatuated with superstition; Stukeley directly inverted the argument, adducing evidence for a primitive Trinitarianism anticipating Anglicanism; and Blake saw the Druids as archetypal Deists and tyrants of state religion.

Much of this conflict is related to the problem of grounding specific religious observances in 'Nature'. Sceptical Rationalism, while not prepared to sacrifice religion to atheistic disorder, saw the need to ground religion in Nature, to base it on a minimum of cultural specificity, and an emphasis on universal rational benevolence and individual human 'Nature' divorced from social custom. I think that the 18th century emphasis on the meditating individual, and the past, is now clarified, at least in part, as being an attempt to answer Blake's question: "Is there a Natural Religion?".

Finally, as an illustration of some of the points made in this paper, I would like to mention the recurrent association of Druids with Oak groves and the wealth of symbolic associations involved. Of course, groves are non-human edifices, and this relates to the association of worship with nature, and the idea that venerable and pious thoughts will spring directly therefrom. Moreover, the adherents of Picturesque Gothic frequently made the comparison between Gothic vaulting and natural vegetation, in contrast to the stuffy formality of neo-classical architecture. Also, the connection with Nationalism is made explicit through 'Hearts of Oke' -- Oak was the wood from which the ships of the British Navy were constructed -- so that this single symbol weaves a wide variety of apparently disparate meanings into a coherent whole.

Thus, although the conventional estimate of the 18th century as a 'Slough of Despond' between more significant periods of scientific

scholarship is not without basis, such a view tends to ignore the significance of 'Romantiquarianism', and its resolute and utterly non-scientific nature. Ironically, this emphasis on archaeology as a pleasurable activity, and on the direct aesthetic experience gained from visiting monuments in their natural setting, seems particularly relevant in terms of the contemporary difficulty of bridging the gap between popular archaeology and the theoretical avant-garde.

Notes

1. Archaeologia vol. i, pp. 1-43. Society of Antiquaries, London, 1770.
2. Though with at least one notable exception -- see below.
3. This phase of functional interest in classification is well illustrated in topographical poetry from Drayton to Denham, which concentrates either on listing natural features (as in Drayton's Polyolbion (Drayton 1612), or providing appropriate eulogies of aristocratic patrons and their country seats (for example, Jonson and Marvell). The concern is with making the landscape both classified and known in terms of possible functional contributions to human activity. The volume of topographical poetry in the late 17th century increases but the change in tone and interest from Denham onwards will be discussed below.
4. See F. Beaumont & J. Fletcher, collected works.
5. See, for example, Dryden's King Arthur; or, The British Worthy, with its stress on teutonic non-classical virtues, accompanied by the paraphernalia of human sacrifices, sacred groves, and so on.
6. See J. Milton, The Complete Prose Works, vol. ii, pp. 217-357.
7. Ibid., pp. 480-571.
8. Alexander Pope, Brutus. Ms. from the Egerton Collection (1950), British Museum; quoted in A.L. Owen (1962), pp. 141-147.
9. William Mason, Caractacus; quoted in A.L. Owen ibid., pp. 147-51.
10. William Cowper, Boadicea; quoted in A.L. Owen ibid., pp. 152-3.
11. And in this Stukeley was by no means exceptional.
12. See W. Blake, The Prophetic Writings, vol. i, p. 490.
13. The 'Jardin Anglais', for example, was recognised by Continentals as a distinctively English tradition.
14. The fate of Capability Brown is relevant here.
15. See The Works of Edmund Burke, pp. 55-220.
16. The close, personal links between these activities are exemplified by the careers of Pope (poet and landscape gardener), Shenstone (poet and landscape gardener) and the Colt-Hoares (landscape gardeners and antiquarians).
17. By Holinshed, for example in the First Volume of the Chronicles of England, quoted by A.L. Owen (q.v.), pp. 6-7.

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