TEACHING ARCHAEOLOGY AS PERPETUAL REVOLUTION

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Archaeology is the attempt to make sense of the litter left by the past. This fulfills the first requirement, that if we are going to talk about teaching archaeology we need first to say what archaeology is. There is only one qualification to be made, and that concerns some of the material litter which has been covered in graffiti. The object and the graffiti as material manifestations are the proper study of archaeology, but the meaning of the graffiti, if that can be deduced, comes into the utterly separate discipline of history. Together they might be used to try to understand 'The Past', but as they are two different subjects, with different subject matter, different methods, different aims, and different philosophies, they should be pursued by different people who might then join in an attempt at synthesis. It may be that there are a few great minds who are equally at home in the two fields; I doubt it because I have never met them or read their works: everyone I know, including myself, is mainly one or the other, basically a dealer in material, or or-eminently a student of what happened in the realms of motives and ideas, and a bloody nuisance if he or she does not recognize where his or her expertise lies. This point is essential to any discussion of teaching archaeology because such an action must start from a recognition of what the subject is and what its practitioners, as such, do.

So, at the university level we are concerned to think about a three year course at the end of which any student will know what the subject is, how it works, and how it relates to the rest of the world, practical and academic. The entrant who wishes to become a practising convert should be equipped for this course: the civil-servant-to-be should derive something useful from the course, likewise the rising executive, manager, or consultant. Here we meet a blank wall of academic snobbery. There is no point in entering into any discussion or argument with snobs in retreat: they should simply be slapped down and forgotten. It has been held that a knowledge of the graffiti on the litter from the past, the Classics, is an end in itself: that life runs down from the moment that the talented student reads his or her last sobriquet and gets a job. At a dinner party a discussion of sources of inspiration in Virgil is uplifting, while a discussion of the mode of action of an anti-histamine drug is not. This is simply because the Virgilian knows nothing about anti-histamines and cannot join the discussion, whereas the medico or biochemist can often listen receptively to a discussion of Virgil and ask intelligent questions. On this unpleasant but highly effective level (effective because it is the superficial level at which politicians, administrators and whizz-kids work) the possessor of a degree in archaeology should be able to survive. He or she can bluff about the historical past, flummox about the actual past, and have in reserve

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discussion of a subject which actually has to have a method and methodology to get anything out of its subject matter. This immediately puts the archaeologist in a position superior to that of the classicist and historian who will almost certainly never have been asked to think about what they have been doing, but just follow on from what was done in the past, and do likewise. It may be that some subjects are taught about methods, but I do not mean methods of historical source criticism, or rules for disentangling philosophies from the past. It may be that a bright historian has thought about these things for him or herself, in which case he or she will come out of the process a more worthwhile person than the dim archaeologist who was made in this way about such things, but in fact did not. That is irrelevant because we are thinking about a course to make people go through the right processes to become the best people they are capable of becoming.

Anything important must be compulsory. The importance must be judged not by the personal opinion of the teacher, but by the empirical observation of the resulting student. In my experience this makes the dissertation, report, project, call it what you will, but not an extended essay, the most important feature of any university archaeological course as presently constituted. The difference in the person before and after any course may be visible and detectable. In the case of taught courses, even where I have taught them, and think they are wonderful and mind-stretching, the difference is small and localised. In the case of the dissertation which takes off the result is sometimes a different person.

What is a dissertation, and why is it not an extended essay? It involves finding a topic in which you are willing to be interested, rather than picking one from a provided list. It involves getting to know all that has been said on the subject in recent, and sometimes not so recent, years. The essayist then writes this down and hands it in: to the boredom of writer and reader alike. The dissertation uses this knowledge, stored up perhaps in notes, to set out, from that point, on a completely solitary journey of exploration. The journey may end up against a rock face with no visible way over, in which case the dissertation becomes the story of reaching the rock face, why it is at present impassable, and whether it could ever be conquered. In fact, more often, it ends at a halting place on a pleasant road just off a main highway: a useful piece of work has been done nearly related to the mainstream. Occasionally it ends in a lush valley which has been completely ignored: the subject was just right, but will not be extendible to an M.Phil. or Ph.D. The student is now a master or mistress of material and its interpretation and should from henceforward be able to do similar work completely on their own.

This is a very English (perhaps British?) view and way of education: it comes as a horrible and sometimes insurmountable shock to American, German, French and other students. But it produces the goods at all levels. At the highest level it produces first class minds capable of virtually anything, which find other courses, even at post-graduate level, feeble. At the middle level it bring the well-intentioned, the hard-working, the academically timid, up to a standard where they can judge their own results, plan into the future, and aim realistically. They have completed something: they know how it fits into the whole of archaeology: they know what they can do. At the lower level it is no different from grade C at GCSE level or D and E at 'A' level, if it often explains to the person who tries that they can do something, how to do it, and why it is not particularly good, and so where they ought to go from there. The only person who gets nothing from a dissertation is the person who does an extended essay instead. This is because extended essays are all very well in themselves, but have already spurned where 'go and do likewise' is the ruling commandment, but, to exist, archaeologists have to be better than that. If they are not, they might find a cozy niche in business or administration.

It is given to very few teachers of English to alter completely our understanding of the development of the novel between 1720 and 1780; yet any oracularising archaeologist who actually goes on thinking guns the chance (sig: economically mixed metaphor or whatever) of producing a completely new view of the Dark Ages in the Cirencester region. This is one of the main assets of the whole idea of archaeology, one that we ought to build on, and one that should be attractive to other academic, intelligent school leavers, and total strangers to politicians, business men, administrators and other undesirable elements in society. Those who run society for their own nasty ends want as few original people about as possible, so my main point is not a good selling line at present.

I am aware that I am talking about the ideal state of things: I have said so at least once above. In the real world of archaeological publication and units we have a muddle that has grown up historically and which is far from this ideal. Pre-war archaeology up to the 1940s was the preserve of enthusiasts. This avoids the inaccurate use of the terms 'amateur' or 'part-timer'. People who wanted to do something did it on their own account, out of curiosity, and no one ever thought of institutionalising it, or even helping in any professional sense. Increased destruction led to increased digging by people who were interested, but were doing more of a job: and the failure to support them led to the great backlog created by good diggers who just had to keep on digging in order to live. The institutionalisation set in to correct this obvious and admitted fault, and archaeology became a job. The present move to turn it into a profession obviously has some good points but its main effect to date is to bring the practice down to the level of inefficiency and mediocrity of other professions. This is not a great goal of a backward looking monstrous but not intended as such, it is a reluctant statement of fact in the hopes of finding a way out of the mess once the mess is admitted rather than covered up. Now all the discussion so far has been on the assumption that the last person a degree in archaeology should produce are competent, feeble, archaeologists. It probably cannot help it, because such people will trickle in, trickle through, and ooze out, but they are
the failures of the process, while those with more originality, but perhaps less devotion to the subject, are the aim.

So should an archaeological degree be one long dissertation: the first year on how to do it, the second year on doing it, and the third year on how you should have done it? No. Point one: most entrants know little about archaeology, and even the most hard-bitten diggers with two years' experience by the age of 18 usually know little about Rome in 500 BC, the arrival of bronze technology in Thailand, or the reasons for the development of agriculture in Middle America. They don't need to know these things, but before they choose their dissertation it would be a good idea to let them hear about them. Otherwise we shall have 95% of dissertations on Bronze Age barrows and Roman villas: even long barrows would take some interest then, and Saxon skulls would be positively enthralling. So they need a good coverage of problems on offer -- Olduvai or Olorgesailie (not Oppida you prehistoric obscurantist). "So," suggests the serpent coiling moistly round the trunk of the tree of knowledge, "would it not be preferable to cover concepts rather than raw phenomena?" Heaven save me from either diggers or dinner-party bores or budding research students who have been thus conditioned. Don't ever teach anyone any idea before giving them the knowledge and ability to try it out in practice. "Wars are always lost by commanders who advance the right flank first." Oh! Write it down. Pointless. Oh yeah? Off to library with the bibliography and some earlier lecture notes: what about XYZ? Domestication of animals always follows a period of drought. So what, where can I check up? How do I know if animals have been domesticated? How do I detect periods of drought? Why should I believe your supposedly beautiful thoughts if you haven't given me at least the rudimentary ideas on how they were arrived at?

Much archaeological reasoning bases itself on the results of excavation. No one is competent to use such results until he or she has produced their own results, on however small a scale. It is a most point as to how far you can teach people to avoid mistakes by telling them about mistakes other people have made. It is worth trying, so the current volume of *Archaeological Journal*, *Antiquaries Journal*, *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society*, *Britannia* and *Medieval Archaeology* should be gutted and filleted and hung up to dry on the rank of discussion classes. Good and bad should be held out for inspection. And the reasons for good and bad should be dissected out and preserved. Going through the process of a dig is obviously essential, and it ought to happen before you use any excavated results in your dissertation. Perhaps in this first year in which a run through "Problems of the World" and "How Not to Burn a Barrow" and "Can Towns be Dug" and if So How" we could allow an extended essay as a preliminary to a dissertation, but only after the students have some idea of the scope of the subjects and burning questions of the moment.

The student who is reared on concepts without a firm basis in material is in the same pit as the historian: the only possible activity is to stir the brew that has been simmering on and off for the past few centuries. The concepts are presented and can be batted around, but they cannot be assessed because the student has no command of the material, or even command of material in general. And material in particular, and material in general, is that which must inform all archaeological model building, conceptualisation, theorising or whatever, if there is to be any standard or progress. Students, given one or two models of concepts, cannot be expected to do this: they do not know the material: they cannot even judge between sensible and silly concepts because they do not know the rules of material in general. They are in a limbo of ideas where no testing or progress or real learning is possible. First have command of some material, and then some of the rules of material, and then look at some ideas. For instance prepare for discussion of cheilostomes, power, class and status, privilege and inequality, à la Frankenstein and Rowlands (1978), by mastering the burial and site material of the Rhein area in the south of Germany. And when the students have to hand how many cemeteries, how many settlements sites excavated and how many published, the problems of dating, what is rare and what is common, how many burials in each cemetery or barrow, how many iron objects from each excavation, then bring in the ideas and say, does it work? And then bring in other ideas and say, do these work better? And from then onwards the student has the power not only to regurgitate Frankenstein and Rowlands, but to compare and contrast, and even suggest ideas of their own which are equally or even more compatible with the material. You are producing an archaeological person rather than a theory nurturing twit.
With University rationalisation, should archaeologists enter his torico-geo-socio-what-not packages? My feeling is that we could only do this if we were concerned with the past, which we are not: we are concerned with the rubbish in the present left by the past. To join in any great interpretive jamboree successfully we would need to know what our methods are, and that is an end which I hope never comes in sight because it would spell the death of the subject. This is the difference between archaeology and history or sociology, that whereas they aim at a statement about the present or the past we are simply a method without definition or end. We do not lead anywhere, we just are, and the moment we knew either what we were doing, or what the answer would be, the process, and archaeology itself, would evaporate.

This is why we make such uneasy collaborators with, for instance, ancient history or medieval studies, or even architecture. They aim at creating a picture and then tinkering with it to produce better detail: a photographer who decides on a view and continues to take different pictures of the same piece of countryside in the hopes of perfection; while we are still inventing cameras and deciding which view to take. We travel hopefully aiming never to arrive, in the knowledge that the journey is the important thing. Our colleagues expect results which, when we are being honest, we have no intention of producing, and would have no interest in once they were produced. Our background knowledge gets better and better all the time as sherds of food vessels are made into corpora and Roman lift-outs are brought together and compared, so that we constantly change our questions and thus keep the true originality of research. Hence the centrality of the dissertation, a training in travel. Hence also every topic discussed is transitory and exemplary -- an example of how someone has done something, what the result is, and why it is wrong, or, for the moment seems right. We still have to eliminate a few teachers who think they know what happened in the past, whereas the right-thinking people know that we can never know what happened in the past. We construct our own pictures of the past as consistent with the material evidence as we can make them, and we are teaching students to do likewise. A good archaeologist should therefore be a good manufacturer because he or she will no sooner have out one method of production into efficient operation than he or she will be working out the next, basing him or herself on the actual evidence available and trying to see how a future method will fit likely changing circumstances. Archaeology which is not perpetual revolution is dead from the neck up and the shoulders down -- a fossilised Adam's Anole. We should be teaching revolution.

Reference


ARCHAEOLOGY AND EDUCATION IN Ironbridge Gorge: A BRIDGE WITH THE PAST? Nigel Holman

Introduction

In this paper my principal intention is to discuss the educational role of archaeology in the context of the unprecedented growth in the last few years of museum presentations of the recent past and, in particular, of the recent industrial past. I choose to discuss this topic with reference to the Ironbridge Gorge Museum, organised around a complex of sites strung along a 3 km stretch of the River Severn, because its considerable popular success is combined with a marginalised role for archaeology in its research activities and presentations. It has not been selected because it is a 'good' or a 'bad' museum; such value judgements must be made with great caution after the criteria on which they are based have been spelled-out, and certainly must not be made in an opening paragraph. I have no hidden motive for singling out the Ironbridge Gorge Museum in preference to other organisations, apart perhaps, for an interest in assessing, as an archaeologist, how a museum which according to many criteria (see below, p. 184), is one of the most successful in the country, presents archaeology to the public. Many readers will recognise that the description and the criticisms I make apply equally to a large number of similar projects which have achieved popularity in a Britain which Peter Fowler (1987, 408) has recently described as "fast becoming one giant museum, a palaeo-themepark, a stately pageant of a stereotyped past": a view shared by many others (eg. Horne 1984: Wright 1985; Hewison 1987).

It is unnecessary to restate at length the view that archaeology is capable of achieving more than the illustration of documentary history since this is the rationale for most archaeologists working in historic periods. I wish to stress, however, that the archaeological investigation and presentation of more recent periods has characteristics which make it worthy of greater consideration by education-minded curators and administrators who deal with the 'historic heritage'.

The considerable gulf in methods and techniques between the disciplines of 'archaeology' and 'industrial archaeology' is a perennial topic of discussion (cf. Clark 1987 but note the dissenting reply by Palmer and Naveverson 1987). It is clear, however, that the theoretical, and in some respects 'political', concerns of academic archaeologists over the last two decades have yet to extend into the realms of industrial archaeology. Those who might suggest that industrial archaeologists are fortunate in this respect are denying the importance of theoretical debate and are doing an injustice to an area of study whose practitioners have recently done much to shake off the image of artefactual-centred technologists.

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