COMMENTARY

ARCHEOLOGISTS AS POLITICIANS: REFLECTIONS ON THE BIRTH OF THE COUNCIL FOR INDEPENDENT ARCHAEOLOGY

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Rather like football, British archaeology can be divided into professional, semi-professional and amateur 'teams'. The professional first division of archaeology may be considered to be dominated by the University teams, but there is little to choose between them and other professional organisations including the Royal Commissions on Historic Monuments for England, Scotland and Wales, English Heritage, Cadw (Welsh for 'Heritage'), the Scottish Development Office and archaeologists working for local government (each English county now has its own County Archaeologist), museums and archaeological units. There are big names too at the semi-pro level: the Society of Antiquaries of London, the main period societies (the Prehistoric Society, the Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, the Society for Medieval Archaeology, the Society for Pre-Medieval Archaeology), the societies devoted to specialist approaches (the Association for Environmental Archaeology, the Association for Industrial Archaeology and a host of others) and even the main "professional" body in British archaeology, the Institute of Field Archaeologists. Dominating the semi-pro field is, however, the Council for British Archaeology (CBA) which, through its highly complex structure, aims to represent the entire British archaeological community. At the amateur level there exist the county and local societies, together with a number of lone archaeological workers and archaeologists in "private practice".

The amateurs probably represent the largest number of archaeologists in the country -- archaeology is, after all, a small profession. Each English county can claim its County society and usually a number of local societies and individual workers. Many local government archaeologists enjoy good relations with amateurs and are happy to use their enthusiasm and talent to useful effect. Many amateurs enjoy high office in the major semi-pro organisations. Despite this, however, there is a feeling among some amateurs that they are not granted their status in the national archaeological league and that their interests come second to those of the professionals. Good relations are perceived to be not universally shared between those employed in full-time archaeology and those who are not: amateurs may be denied access to work on a site under excavation by professionals; their abilities may be derided; they may never be approached by local professionals to carry out urgent work for them, even when there is a shortage of available professionals. At the same time, those semi-professional bodies like the CBA and some of its Regional groups who aim to represent the interests of all archaeologists may tend to hold their meetings at times when amateurs find it difficult to attend: weekday afternoons, for example, when one can expect active amateurs to be at the factory or office, earning the money that supports them in archaeology: the result is that the meetings are dominated by professionals (especially academic professionals) and their concerns.

Among the disgruntled amateurs are some who recall with irony the 19th century origins of the CBA as a confederation of local archaeological societies: this was long before archaeology became a profession, or even a serious academic discipline in its own right. They feel that their birthright has been stolen from them and suffer a keen sense of the loss of their influence in archaeological affairs. Indeed, they feel that the word 'amateur' itself is degrading, carrying overtones of poor performance and low ability. Accordingly, in recent years they have sought to find another term, more worthy of approbation and less prone to abuse. One is reminded of the old distinction between amateur and professional male cricketers: 'genuine' and 'players'. Purely negative terms -- 'non-professional', 'unpaid', 'part-time' -- do not carry the air of Victorian distinction required for the practitioners of a demanding academic pursuit. The word finally settled upon -- 'independent' (note the upper case 'I') -- delivers the message without, they feel, distortion.

The choice of term is not one without its problems. It is not entirely clear from what or whom the 'independent' is independent, nor quite who is included or excluded. Essentially the term means any archaeologist who is not employed by an agency or body whose aim is to do archaeology: thus, University and local or national government archaeologists are excluded; but those who live on research grants seem to be included, as do teachers who teach archaeology in their schools (although with the national curriculum on its way they are likely to be few of those left shorty). Some self-employed archaeologists are included, and others choose to exclude themselves. It is similarly unclear as to the status of students in this regard -- including the self-financing ones.

The 'Independent Archaeology movement' has been in existence for some four years now. It first emerged with the first Congress of Independent Archaeologists, held in Cambridge in 1985. I did not attend and so can offer no comments on it, but it appears to have been fairly standard in form, built around a series of planned talks. It was nevertheless deemed a success and a second Congress was held -- again in Cambridge -- in 1987. This was a much less structured affair, with more input expected from those attending. The core of the Congress was a wide expanse of time filled by individuals selling their own archaeological wares. The standard of presentation in this protracted session varied from the good to the appallingly bad: I was frequently reminded of those dreadful singer-songwriters whose shows consist of all their songs separated by the refrain "... and then I wrote ..."; here the refrain was "... and then I dug ...". While much of the work described was clearly of high standard in execution, the content was frequently dull: how many slides of brown earth being turned over by a trowel
can you stand? By contrast, the Congress began and ended with discussion sessions -- brief introductions by interested speakers followed by an open introduction to contributions from the floor -- on issues of substantive and practical concern: the role of the professional; the ethics of excavation; the role of the county and local society; and "expertise: how to gain it". The primary aim of these sessions was to highlight the failings of existing structures so far as the Independents were concerned, and it showed. Nevertheless, some worthwhile points were made and it was at least an attempt to bring these matters into the open even if from a somewhat narrow perspective.

The final session of the second Congress concerned the passage of a resolution concerning the establishment of a "liaison group" specifically concerned to promote the interests of Independents within the CBA. The final version of the resolution -- modified by Henry Cotte (Director of the CBA) so as to remove the harsher words of earlier drafts -- was overwhelmingly passed by those present, only one person speaking against and a mere four votes being recorded in opposition. But for various complicated reasons -- chiefly to do with the complex, legalistic structure of the CBA -- it proved not possible for the Independents to set themselves up as a special interest group within the CBA. Instead, it was agreed that a new body should be established and that the liaison should take place between this body and the CBA. The primary role of the new body would be to act as a coordinating body for archaeological resources, and to tap new sources of funds for archaeology. This process took a long two years and several meetings of an ad hoc (and largely self-appointed) committee, at all of which the CBA was represented. It is perhaps worth noting that one of the people taking part in these meetings was the one person who had spoken against the setting up of the "liaison group" in the first place: this apparent perfidy was actually the result of a desire to see that an organisation that was going to be set up anyway should be of some positive benefit to archaeology and not a distraction and a diversion of resources; well, that's my story and I'm sticking to it.

Things reached a head at the third Congress of Independent Archaeologists, held in York in September 1989. This time, the focus of the Congress was expressly "political" and devoted to the discussion of issues of concern to archaeology. As before, the aim was to display the failure of existing structures and to promote a rather 19th century ideal of the amateur and the local. The first session considered archaelogical publication and was followed by a session on archaeological education. Although not intended by the Congress planners, this turned into a discussion of the future of archaeology in the planned national curriculum for schools, although since one of the speakers had chosen to attend the Congress rather than "an important meeting (on the national curriculum) in London" they somewhat weakened their case that this was an issue of vital concern, especially since the CBA Education Officer had (rightly) chosen to attend the meeting rather than the Congress.

The centrepiece of the Congress was a "regional roundup" concerned with the way archaeology was organised in the various parts of Britain. The regions were deliberately based on the regional organisation of the CBA, which groups counties rather randomly in England and treats Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as single groups despite their size and internal diversity: the CBA regional group is a key player in the archaeological game since it mediates between the county and national levels of organisation. Subsequent carping by certain members of the CBA that the Congress -- while voicing opposition to the CBA -- "stole" its regional organisation for its own purposes is thus out of place. The aim of the session was to provide an overview of how archaeology was actually done, the relative roles of professionals and Independents and the level of coordination between them in each of the chosen regions. Unfortunately it failed. Contributions wavered between, on the one hand, detailed statistics of how many organisations there were county by county, archaeological work in progress and who was doing what, and how the formal structures operated; and, on the other, "my latest dig" or -- worse -- "my private site". The former approach was tedious and ultimately meaningless; the latter missed the point of the session entirely. Accordingly, an opportunity to analyse and consider the way archaeology is actually carried out in this country -- from those who know because they are doing it -- was lost.

The regional roundup overran substantially -- largely because of the long-windedness of the "my last dig" brigade -- and as a result the planned session on the "human resources of archaeology" did not take place. Instead, more time was devoted to the final session at which the body proposed by the "liaison group" committee was to be formally constituted.

It was clear by now that this was to be a fairly bloody affair, hence the title of this piece. Opposition to a new body had grown since the second Congress: no longer did one lone voice cry in the wilderness. Instead, the wolves were howling in the byre. The previous evening, anti-Independent activists (they may prefer to be called 'pro-CBA' but there is no evidence that the CBA encouraged or supported them) had carried out a poll to discover the degree of support for or against the new body. It transpired that one individual had been "warned off" by his county archaeologist with threats and this goes a long way to explain his particular (and unpleasant) fervour. There were hints dropped of dark deeds, of financial impropriety, of plots to subvert the CBA, of self-seeking ambition; innocent members of the "liaison group" committee were severely cross-questioned on their role but the answers ignored. The whole thing was redolent of a McCarthyite witch-hunt, with people's archaeological reputations -- and even careers -- at stake. Or so it was made out. The session itself was equally unpleasant. Tempers were frayed, and some lost outright. As the formal vote to constitute the new body came close, due to a combination of wilful obstruction (by some) and confusion (among others) a substantial number of those present walked out. Those remaining voted the new body -- to be called
the Council for Independent Archaeology -- into existence, adopted the draft constitution and elected a governing committee.

It is difficult to see quite why there should have been -- and remains -- so much opposition to the new organisation. The name of the new body deliberately reflects that of the CBA (and it shares its initials with an even more famous -- or notorious -- organisation) but any quick replacement of the CBA by the CIA must be ruled out. Personalities certainly played a large part -- some of those involved in the CIA are not popular among certain sections of the archaeological community. But what? Surely the point is that to work with someone towards a common end does not require that you like or even agree with them. Archaeology is an academic discipline: debate is a key part in it. It was clear from the second Congress that some form of new body was to be established, and very shortly obvious that it could not be a formal part of the CBA. The CBA was throughout involved in the preliminary discussions, and yet there is now evidence of some dismay in the counsels of the CBA that the CIA has come into existence. This is at least illogical and perhaps even indicative of serious organisational flaws in British archaeology: because of the confusion at the final session of the third Congress the new body was voted into being by less than forty people. Are we seriously expected to believe that the CBA considers itself threatened by such a small body? Are the structures of British archaeology so fragile? The main argument against the formation of the new body was that it would serve only to divide archaeology and divert resources from other needs. Some of those involved believed that the new Council should tap new resources and could thus act as a valuable support to the Independent sector in archaeology, to the CBA and to archaeology as a whole. By failing to listen to what was said and intended and by walking out at a crucial moment -- and taking others with them -- the opponents of the new group denied these people their natural constituency among the members of the new Council. The end result may well be what the opponents feared (or said they did) -- and it must be deemed their fault.

Further Congresses of Independent Archaeologists are planned. They will be organised by the new Council for Independent Archaeology. The Congress was, to my knowledge, the only regular open meeting of archaeologists in this country where matters of internal political and organisational concern to archaeology were discussed. The membership of the body to organise in future consists largely of the people who gave the "... and then I dug ...", "my last dig" and "my private site" presentations at former Congresses. If they have their way a useful biennial meeting -- flawed but getting better -- will disappear from the archaeological round to be replaced by a mere showpiece for their egos.

IN SEARCH OF THE SACRED...? SOME THEMES RAISED BY SACRED AND PROFANE: A CONFERENCE ON ARCHAEOLOGY, RITUAL AND RELIGION, OXFORD, 28th-29th OCTOBER, 1989

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The influence of Emile Durkheim lies like an ancestral shade over the human sciences, and in particular the study of religion. As a member of the sociological Holy Trinity, with Marx and Weber as fellow soul-mates, he was involved in the formation (one might even say Genesis) of some of the main analytical categories used by students of past and present societies.

The title of this conference, The Sacred and the Profane might appear to reflect a Durkheimian concern with the separation of 'holy' from 'mundane' spheres of social action. However, as the sessions proceeded, it became clear that many speakers came not so much to praise the spirit of Durkheim, but to bury, or at least modify, it.

The content of papers was diverse, ranging from analyses of Iranian tombstones (Inge Demant Mortensen) to reflections on Japanese totems (Simon Kaner). Even so, many provided variations on a single, important theme: Is it possible, or indeed desirable, to separate off religious or ritual practices from other forms of behaviour? Or does this fall into the trap, constructed by an unlikely (and unholy?) alliance of theologians and 'materialists', of developing a notion of the sacred as merely comprising the irrational -- that which cannot be explained in terms of 'commonsense'?

In the first paper, John Barrett surveyed some problems of definition. Many have assumed that ritual is a specific form of human action, but, he asked, on what grounds can we do this? Even anthropologists have found it difficult to come up with any satisfactory definition of ritual activity. We might argue that it concerns symbolic action, but since all human behaviour works in this way, such an argument is not precise enough for analytical purposes. Thus far, Barrett's argument echoed some of the debates which have raged within anthropological circles. These have concerned the extent to which ritual can be seen as the non-technical or aesthetic aspect of all behaviour, as well as the question of whether ritual need necessarily be related to the sphere of the sacred.

For the archaeologist, the idea that the sacred can always be recognized as involving a discrete sphere of action is dangerously seductive; either it becomes that which is clearly separate from the domestic world -- like large monuments or temples -- or it serves as an explanatory dustbin, a category into which data that are anomalous (and therefore dangerous to