

Interpretation and Criticism:
A Justification for Archaeology

We like to think that even archaeological knowledge may someday prove useful to some society. Indeed I might even venture to hope that the archaeological knowledge embodied in the present book may be useful in helping its readers to think more clearly and so behave more humanly.

(Childe 1956, 127)

Despite the recent proliferation of archaeological literature dealing with questions of archaeological theory and method, there have been surprisingly few attempts to explore the possible aims of, and justifications for, the discipline of archaeology. Few would deny Childe's proposition, as expressed above, that such a justification is ultimately rooted in the relationship between the academic study of archaeology and its wider social context.

Pragmatically, archaeology is an expensive discipline dependent upon public funding to provide its practitioners' wages. On a more idealistic plane, the ultimate task of archaeology is to inform society at large of its past.

"Public archaeology" has achieved a higher profile recently, generating much debate about its aims, purposes and methods. It has also provided the public with many differing experiences of material culture provided by museums, sites and standing monuments. The bulk of such presentation remains traditional in character. Despite achieving the systematic display of

a wide range of artefacts, interpretation or explanation is sparse and is unlikely to provoke an active response from the visitor. Most museums are forced to continue to present their material in this manner due to constraints of finance. It could be argued that this is a vicious circle; the limitations of such exhibits tend to encourage an underestimation of the potential cultural value of the artefacts on view, resulting in subsequent financial stringency.

Reconstructions of aspects of life in the past have often been offered as an alternative to such traditional approaches. At "flagship" presentations such as Colonial Williamsburg in the USA and the Jorvik Viking Centre in England, as well as at countless folklife museums in Europe and America, full-scale replicas as well as costumed figures and individuals purport to recreate a living past in the present. While overcoming some of the criticisms levelled at traditional static exhibits, these can be criticised on rather different grounds.

By replacing the comprehensive nature of the museum display case with the selection of particular tableaux of past life -- both of incidents and relationships -- the ability of the visitor to actively interpret what he or she sees is still absent. This problem is compounded by presenting value-laden living situations as directly demonstrable from the evidence. In fact, of course, the gaps in the evidence are filled with values and preconceptions derived from the present.

Thus at Colonial Williamsburg a white baker gives commands to his black assistant (Leone 1981, 9), while at Jorvik the shift of interpretation of Vikings as barbarian pillagers to capitalists of the 10th century is readily apparent yet unexplored. Thus the exhibits remain passive and even dangerous in that they conceal from the public the limitations of archaeological inference.

Conversely, however, it would follow that an exhibit showing how and why inferences are made from archaeological evidence will give to the public the means of criticising and evaluating archaeological interpretations for themselves. For example, the Public Archaeology Project in Annapolis (USA) uses an excavation in progress firstly to show the methods and techniques used by archaeologists and, secondly, how the more general conclusions drawn are influenced by the social and political conditions of the present (Leone 1983, 48).

The example of Annapolis, as well as that of other projects, establishes the principle that archaeology can do more than simply describe and interpret the past. It can also be used to introduce the concept of active criticism -- the means to assess and evaluate evidence and interpretations -- into what the public is told.

This principle can, of course, also be seen to operate within the study of written history; similar problems of collation, synthesis and interpretation apply equally. Furthermore, within the study of the social sciences as a whole, such questions recur, for example, in politics, sociology, journalism and international relations. It

is, in fact, one of the central tenets of a 'liberal education' however that may be defined.

Archaeology's strength and justification lies in its particular suitability for communicating this principle of active criticism. Its obvious popularity in all media lies in its accessibility to the public. The appeal of artefacts and monuments is immediate: they are visual, tactile and three-dimensional, unlike the pages of a history book. Further, excavation is an essentially exciting process, being as much an act of discovery as an exploration of uncharted lands. Finally, it offers a unique combination of the familiar and the exotic in the prehistoric sherd dug up in the back garden or the stone axe found on a dried-up African river bed.

Archaeologists therefore have the ability not only to provide enjoyment for the public but also to contribute to the emphasis on critical judgement. Steps towards this aim could be taken in a variety of contexts: in schools and museums, on excavations, as well as through the mass media. Practising archaeologists rarely visit schools and so have little opportunity to communicate the essence of their discipline to children. If this were possible, brief and out-dated chronological accounts of the kind given by teachers could be augmented by open discussion of what archaeologists really do and how artefacts that may be handed round the classroom are used to reconstruct past ways of life. The aim would not merely be to inform schoolchildren about the remote past, but also to explore at an elementary level the problems of interpretation in a context where the evidence is very much at hand.

In traditional teaching, for example of history, the link with primary evidence cannot be made in such a direct manner.

Museums may also promote the active discussion of interpretations of the past. Alternative scenarios could be presented to the public, from demonstrably the same evidence, and the visitor challenged to decide what he or she considers to be the more plausible reconstruction. The hushed tones of quasi-religious whispers should thus be replaced by informed debate in the galleries. Again, archaeological techniques may themselves be the subject of museum displays. However, there is a danger in this -- techniques, particularly those of archaeological science, may be presented as so abstruse and complex that the clear implication given is that the interpretation of the past is the exclusive domain of white-coated experts.

However, of course, the most obvious place to show the process of archaeological interpretation at work is the excavation itself. Unfortunately, the potential for public access and involvement generally takes second place to the research aims of the excavation and practical questions of insurance and completion deadlines. However, while this may preclude such activity on some sites, there is no reason why many excavations, such as those in Annapolis could not give more emphasis to public demonstrations of how a site is dug involving staff trained in the techniques of public presentation (Leone 1983). Superficially, this may not appear viable but its value is confirmed when seen as one part of a wider research project. Hence, the Public Archaeology Project in

Annapolis, which had to be funded from outside the excavation budget, was justified as both an educational experiment and an exercise in public relations.

Finally, it is apparent that the potential of television and video has hardly been fulfilled. It provides an opportunity to extend the principles discussed in the context of museums to a much wider audience. The immediacy and flexibility which can be achieved through this medium can be particularly conducive to the promotion of debate and criticism. Television archaeology can, with the assistance of an enlightened producer, be more than a whistlestop tour past a series of grassy mounds led by a charming yet unprovocative guide.

This article has sought to demonstrate that archaeology is particularly well-suited to communicating the ideas of critical judgement. These ideas are underestimated in many educational systems and are, we assert, essential components of any society claiming to be democratic and liberal.

References

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