

Ideas in Archaeology — further thoughts

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WHILE I cannot hope—and would not wish—to emulate Richard Reece's elegancies of style in his essay on the lines of a miniature Elia, his stimulating piece does demand that others should also try their hand at posing and answering similar questions. Between the serried pots and the part masticated trench reports that form *L.A.*'s normal bill of fare, there must (I hope) be room for a whole series of such archaeological kites.

Richard Reece asks, but does not answer, a very basic question—the basic question. He draws attention in passing to the historical background and predilections of most archaeologists (well, of most of those who have backgrounds and predilections) and quite rightly slates the archaeologists who try to stretch their evidence in the wrong way. How well he has written what several of us think but have lacked the courage to write.

Equally open to criticism—perhaps more open as they ought to know better—are the new sociological schools of archaeological interpreters. Not, perhaps, "new"—"revivalist" might be a better word, for haven't we been here before? And haven't the new practitioners ever read Wainwright (F. T., that is!) or Piggott on the limits of inference from archaeological evidence?

Richard Reece is also commendably rude about the "full lives of the people" school of archaeologist (or should it be shoal?). Again vide Wainwright and Piggott. In this, of course, the archaeologist—particularly in the "amateur" echelons—has problems with his local historian brethren who seem essentially oriented in the direction of personal names for faceless ghosts. The statistical palaeo-demographers are at least more honest and hardly more dull.

It can even be suggested that archaeological evidence is not really historical at all, or at least only marginally historical. But, in that case, what is its nature? Dare we, even among friends, be so foolhardy as to attempt to answer this? Obviously a rhetorical question, or why would I have started to write?

The archaeologist may sometimes get his satisfactions, as Richard Reece describes, as a craftsman. (This may, incidentally, explain why some archaeological reports fail to get written but, for the price of a pint of real ale, I will reveal evidence to contradict this: since it is wholly flattering to Richard Reece and not at all complimentary to myself, I will not write it

down.) This knowledge helps us to understand archaeologists. It does not help us understand the nature of archaeological evidence and we will pass on.

To use the punning jargon of our times, archaeological evidence exists at two levels (each of which can be sub-divided into as many levels as you like, no matter). Firstly, there is the basic material—pot sherds, post holes, coins, and so on. Study of these is interesting, even fascinating, and the results synthesised or aggregated only slightly, can, and often do, interest others: people *do* like to know what kind of jug was used in 14th century London, what kind of house our ancestors lived in (we will return to this particular point—keep it in mind) and so on. This alone justifies the activity and the public expense. But it is not, I suspect, enough and I doubt if it was what Richard Reece had in mind.

We need, therefore, to look at the second level: the fully synthesised level. But that statement begs the question. The way the evidence is synthesised will affect the purposes to which the results can be put. The way in which the excavator or whatever expects the results to be used will affect the way he does his synthesis: full circle. However aims come before expedients.

The aim cannot be history. Archaeology can contribute to history but it cannot be considered as fundamentally a branch of history. Archaeological evidence is rooted only indefinitely in time but it is rooted precisely in location: therefore archaeological evidence is fundamentally geographical and the aims of synthesis must be geographical first and historical second. Historical geography if you like, but that is not a necessary qualification: geography is not concerned only with instantaneous snapshots of the here and now—it is deeply concerned with the how and why and, in this, archaeology can provide vital and unique evidence.

Realisation of this torpedoes much of the waffle about academic priorities. It is a perfectly valid academic question (possibly the only perfectly valid academic question) to ask, of every spot on the earth, what manner of man has occupied this spot and, roughly if not precisely, when. This can be taken one stage further: what are the geographical implications of the answers, including the implications of negative answers?

Priorities become involved in two main ways. Firstly, there are questions to be asked before we can

happily ask our universally valid one—for example: “how do we identify 5th century occupation at a given site?” The need to provide replies to that and similar questions could itself lead to the formulation of research priorities. Secondly, and more generally, there must be the question of whether a given site provides any prospect of supplying any sensible answer to the universal question. No point in wasting effort if the answer to that one is negative or at best dubious.

This matter has, incidentally, many implications about how we should draw distribution maps, but that's another story.

I threatened to return to the question of our ancestors, a matter beloved by our friendly local historians. Our individual and collective *ancestors* are inevitably the field of the genealogist and only in rare cases can they penetrate any distance. Our *predecessors* in a given place, however, are a different kettle of fish and these are the separate subjects of local historians and archaeologists alike. But, again, archaeologists and local historians alike are studying the place not, *vide* Richard Reece, the people. The studies of both can only tell us little about the people; they can tell us much about the place and what these little known predecessors did to it.

In as much, therefore, as the archaeologist is an historian at all, he is a landscape historian and has nearly always so been. The local historian can join the landscape bandwagon or not, as the mood takes him, but once the intricacies of manorial descent and

institutional progress have been worked out there is little else left for him to do. The archaeologist cannot avoid the landscape of which his site is part. The shadow of Hoskins falls on us all.

While modern, and not so modern, destruction will not allow answers to our universal question in many places, especially in those places where most things have happened, it becomes of growing importance to concentrate on those parts of the jig-saw puzzle which enable the missing pieces to be guessed at (“inferred” is the polite term): the geographer's technique of pattern making. Up to a point, the confirmation of inferred patterns is a justified activity, even a priority, but beyond that hard-to-define point, we will only be providing redundant information. In most areas of archaeology today any site that produces a decently stratified sequence of deposits and artefacts, over an area large enough to see what it is we are digging, will be well short of the point of redundancy. In some areas, even the poorly stratified site glimpsed through a keyhole-sized trench will be on the useful side of the redundancy point: these areas should be clearly defined and identified. But in many areas the keyhole examination of poorly stratified deposits will be unlikely to produce more than redundant information—potsherds hardly worth washing—but at least, here “fun” archaeology can do little harm, as long as the standards are high enough to avoid spurious and incorrect conclusions. In some areas, even the large scale, well conducted and expensive excavation will only produce redundant information: this should be avoided as we cannot afford it.

Dr. John Morris

DR. JOHN MORRIS, Senior Lecturer in Ancient History at University College, London and author of *The Age of Arthur*, died on 1st June at the age of 63. It is a hard task to write in the past tense of one who lived so fully and left with all whom he encountered an impression of youthful vigour. His pupils in the University and elsewhere will be suffering a particularly keen sense of loss, for his enthusiasm in teaching and his perpetual interest in his students made him immensely popular.

It was my own good fortune to attend his seminars at University College, where it was the tradition that first year students in the Classics Department received from him a grounding in the history of the ancient Mediterranean civilisations. Yet the objective of his teaching was as much to provoke thought as to impart facts. He was a perfect choice for a difficult task, that of freeing young minds reared on the examination system from the mental constraints acquired from such an environment. If his charges were to think without fetters, then each must learn for himself or herself the importance not of furnishing answers but of posing questions, not of quoting authorities but of knowing sources. To these things we were led, not dragged, and for each there was the trauma of discovering that knowledge was confusing and paradoxical, yet alive and dynamic. In some he awakened an urgent need, a quest for the roots of our knowledge of the ancient world. These would elect to follow him in studies shaped to reveal the true nature of

source material and to grapple with the thorny problem of assessing bias and subjectivity in ancient texts. His selection of the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius and the Roman occupation of Britain as special subjects for finals provided fertile ground on which those who were fired by his approach might exercise their minds.

Inevitably he developed a following among those whom he taught, for without affectation he was at ease with all and would join an undergraduate party at the drop of a hat. He was a source of continuing fascination to us, full of energy, full of humour, and in so many ways the antithesis of his contemporaries whom we so blithely and wrongfully maligned. His chequered career on the left wing of politics, his involvement with the Committee of One Hundred, the manner in which his charisma brought to the door of his study the most astonishing range of personalities, all added to the unique atmosphere of joyous intrigue which permeated everything that he taught and did.

He would sit often with his students, long after hours, clearly enjoying their company as much as they his. I recall a contemporary demanding from him the name of some Greek battle, the answer to a clue in a crossword we were striving to complete. Morris had clearly forgotten it but did not hesitate, “I'm an historian, you know, not a chronicler”, came the chiding but gentle reply. Let none deny it.

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