

PASS – NO CORRECTIONS!

July 29, 2011 jamesdoeser Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2011 Archaeology, Arts Council, Doctor of Philosophy, Dr James, PhD, PhD supervisor, Public archaeology, supervisor, United Kingdom, viva

Hello again. Well, let's start with the basics: I passed with no corrections required. This is pretty much the best possible outcome from a PhD viva. First of all a few words about the process, then onto the flavour of our discussions.

I met with my PhD supervisor ten minutes before the scheduled start of the viva, we had a general chat about how the viva might pan out and he was kind enough to drop some heavy hints that things were likely to turn out well. I was quite nervous as I entered the exam room and introduced myself to the examiners. I knew their identities in advance and I knew one of them fairly well as he is an academic at the same department where I was studying. Their opening gambit was not "what do you think you have achieved?" or "what do you think is your original contribution to the field?" but "let's start by saying that you have passed and we will not be asking you to make any further corrections". What a relief! This instantly put me at ease and the rest of the viva was then a vigorous discussion about my research, my conclusions and the nature of archaeology and government. This might sound dull to some of you but I promise it is all really important stuff.

One of the difficulties I encountered while conducting my research was attempting to reconstruct the actual history of how certain pieces of government policy were put together. I attempted to do this through interviewing key people in those processes, going through archives and reading about previous attempts by historians and archaeologists to do something similar. How was I supposed to differentiate fact from fiction and triangulate these various sources of data? Honestly, I'm not sure if I managed to do that sufficiently but I managed to convince my examiners that I had done the best that anyone could do. Another issue that we touched upon was whether I had been able to get a comprehensive picture of how and why certain government policies came into being. Had I varied my source material enough? This was something that I had been conscious of throughout my research. The formulation of public policy (and this is true in the case of archaeology policy) is a fairly opaque process which eludes critical examination. Nevertheless, I once again managed to explain my efforts to my examiners who made helpful suggestions for further sources of evidence that I might want to consult should I choose to publish my research. So, although my research was not about the archaeology of a particular place at a particular time, or about the emergence of farming or human evolution, it did exhibit the characteristics of all archaeological research: I was having to work with fragmentary remains of past human experiences and reconstruct them into a coherent narrative that sought to explain something about our place in the modern world. That is what archaeology is all about.

Enough philosophising... back to the viva... after a full 75 minutes I left the exam room with congratulatory handshakes from my examiners and a hefty slap on the back from my supervisor. It's great to be at the very end of my PhD research, it's been a hard slog at times with some serious bouts of intellectual insecurity but it has also been an amazing journey through the intersecting worlds of politics and archaeology. I have discovered new things, met some amazing people and hopefully made a modest contribution to human knowledge (wow, that sounds heavy). My research activities have helped me to get a really interesting job with the Arts Council that looks more broadly at the development of cultural policy in England. I'll try and write a post about that at the end of the day. In the meantime, it's back to the day job...