

Original Sin

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NO, THIS IS not an essay on church archaeology, or even an exhortation for archaeologists to follow the latest pronouncements of CBA or Gromaticus.

I just want to draw attention to an error common enough among archaeologists to be considered original. This is the construction of ever larger edifices on flimsy evidential foundations.

We all do it. Which one of us has not dated a layer, deposit or feature by one small sherd of pottery that could equally well have been derivative, contemporary or intrusive (few layers are absolutely sealed)? Such dating may not matter when it is suitably cushioned by "scholarly" caution—the heavy use of "suggests that," "possibly" or "appears to" is inevitable, if somewhat inelegant, in any cautious archaeological report.¹

Unfortunately the matter does not stop there. The excavator's "possibly" often becomes the synthesiser's "probably" and the popularist's "certainly." Even this does not matter too much if the excavator's justified caution remains in print for future workers to read. What does matter is that some excavators, or all excavators some of the time, tend to move their own "possibly" towards "certainly." This is a serious intellectual error that does us no good.

I realise, of course, that much depends on the audience. We all have to act out greater certainty when talking to the Local W.I. or Round Table. This can be justified. But a similar upgrading of probability cannot be justified in publications, such as *the London Archaeologist*, aimed primarily at fellow labourers in the same vineyard.

The practice descends from venial sin to mortal sin when *lack of evidence* is promoted to positive support for an hypothesis. Archaeology, if it is to remain intellectually respectable, must follow the philosophical tenets of Karl Popper: hypotheses must be set up and offered for refutation. Once refuted, an hypothesis must be scrapped and replaced by a new hypothesis, also offered for refutation. The mere absence of evidence cannot be

taken to signify the absence of the possibility of refutation. Only repeated or surprising positive evidence that does not refute can do that.

Let us quote as an example the work of Mr. Whitehouse at Fulham Palace. I have no wish to slander Mr. Whitehouse or even, particularly, to criticise. I merely use him as an example—he is certainly tough enough to stand the criticism. He started with an attractive if somewhat surprising hypothesis: that the apparently medieval moat around Fulham Palace originated in a Roman earthwork on the same site.² This was in competition with the hypothesis of Sir Arthur Blomfield that the moat originated in a Danish earthwork on the same site. Both hypotheses were in competition with the view that the earthwork is what it seems to be—a medieval moat.³ None of the hypotheses had been tested, let alone refuted.

So Mr. Whitehouse, sensibly, dug a trench. Unfortunately for all of us the only positive evidence he found was that the moat as we see it to-day is post-Roman.⁴ However this did not prevent him from taking the lack of evidence as support for his hypothesis, an error we all might have committed.

In the second article, where lack of evidence and unjustified conclusions lay side by side, this did not matter much. But in a more recent article,⁵ Mr. Whitehouse takes his earlier conclusion as a positive fact. Here the error begins to take on rather more importance for not everyone who reads the third article will have read the second.

I don't want to labour this example, for I offer it purely as *an example*. And I must emphasize that we are all guilty of the same sort of error from time to time. It is an error that can lead to the unrecognised circular argument. How many sites are dated, I wonder, on the basis of pottery that is dated on the basis of sites that are dated on the basis of pottery that is dated on . . . ?

1. See, however, P. Rahtz, 'How Likely is Likely' *Antiquity* 49 No. 193 (1975) 56-61.

2. K. Whitehouse, 'Early Fulham' *London Archaeol* 1 No. 15 (1972) 344-7.

3. D. Haselgrove, 'Early Fulham — a Rejoinder' *London Archaeol* 2 No. 1 (1972) 20-1.

4. K. Whitehouse, 'A Section across Fulham Palace Moat' *London Archaeol* 2 No. 6 (1974) 142-7.

5. K. Whitehouse, 'Fulham Palace' *London Archaeol* 2 No. 9 (1974) 211-4.