

# Ideas in Archaeology

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CONTEMPLATION of one's navel, even when physically possible, is not a practice at present encouraged in archaeology. It is the same thing as sitting and having beautiful thoughts, and, as we know, beautiful thoughts get no pots washed. To ask whether it is worth washing the pots if we have not thought out why we are doing it and what is going to happen next is variously interpreted as *lèse majesté* when the director thinks he knows what he's doing, or bloodyminded laziness when the director does not know *what* he is doing, but does know that it *has* got to be done. In other words, to ask what, why, or how, is regrettably allowable for undergraduates who, according to some, are wasting their time anyway, but is inadmissible self-amusement for those in a serious rescue situation who have to get on with the job.

The obvious starting point in any attempt to sort out my own view on the subject must be Collingwood's dictum that you must ask questions if you are to get answers, must ask the right questions if you are to get the right answers, and must ask the right questions of the right material if you are to get valid answers. This immediately raises the subject to a rarified level, in which the week-ender is lost. It misses the point that a lot of people, me included, dig because they like doing it. I like using a trowel; it gives me satisfaction when I have made a better job of trimming a section or sectioning a deep post-hole in sand than someone else, and this is the basic reason why I actually get down in a trench and dig. At this point it is irrelevant what the site is, or why it is being dug, and, to me, finds are a distraction. As there are hundreds of sites around the country which are going to be destroyed in the next year no one can object if digs, however unskilful, are organised on some of these sites for the pleasure and recreation of part-time diggers, so long as no one else is willing and able to dig them for "higher" reasons.

Except, some would say, that it is such a waste of time and effort when these people might be doing something useful. If such a person is asked *what* would be more useful, he will invariably reply, "digging on my site for instance", and if asked why that is more useful he will usually fold up and tell you not to talk nonsense. Digging for amusement or enjoyment can only be called a waste of time if we know

of something better. And we can only know of something better if we have thought out our priorities and our basic assumptions. Here Collingwood gives us a very salutary warning to expect trouble if we persist in this line of enquiry; "people are apt to be ticklish in their absolute presuppositions" (*Essay on Metaphysics*, p.31). One of the more ticklish areas to be examined is the confusion between history, archaeology, and humanity.

I once thought that it was only Romanists who muddled up history and archaeology. I now know that it is a disease endemic among those who work on the past. The problem seems to me to be one of growing up; much archaeology has been fostered by classicists and historians, and these kind parents will not let the children out of the nest. To be fair, many of the children do not want to leave the nest to go into a world where they would have to think out their own methodology, so they stick to the concepts of their parent classic or history. But classics is a well defined and understood subject, the study of Greek and Roman authors; and history is perfectly well defined as the study of the past through written texts. Archaeology has its own role to play as the study of the past through material remains.

Though lip service is often paid to these divisions, confusion is usually encouraged under the guise of co-operation. It is quite true that many subjects should be studied as "the history and archaeology of . . .", but that does not mean that the two aspects are the same, deal with the same material, use the same methods, or can be expected to come to the same conclusions. Let us bring in here the herring.

I gather that the dependent villages of Barchester situated on the coast, sent to the mother town an annual fee of herrings, thus far the written records. I also gather that early medieval rubbish pits, of the same date as the documents, excavated recently at Barchester revealed many pork and beef bones, and a few cod bones, but no herring bones, thus far the archaeology. At a conference the subject of the diet of twelfth century Barchesterians was raised and the delegates were puzzled by the conflict between the historical and archaeological evidence. They should not have been, for the two lots of evidence were quite different in nature, required different methods of assessment, and neither ought to have been taken

as evidence on diet. The herring fee is an entry in a document; it needs a historian to say whether it would have been paid in kind or commuted into money, to tell us the size of this fee, and the number of inhabitants of Barchester at this date, and finally the historian might tell us the rough ratio of herrings per person per day. The archaeologist must tell us what his rubbish pits represent, if he can, in terms of rubbish, and time, and individuals, and then, when these two sets of facts, dealt with by two separate methods, have been settled, they may be compared to see if there is any point of contact. The likelihood is that the historian will tell us that there was 0.05 herring per person per day, the archaeologist will tell us that the rubbish pits represent the rubbish of ten person/meals, and the person who does sums on the back of old envelopes will tell us that even if the herrings were distributed evenly through the population there was only a 50:50 chance of the pit containing such bones anyway. And no one can say anything useful about diet.

The matter of diet needs to be pushed further because it brings in humanity. The historian of twelfth century Barchester is almost certainly not going to be in a position to tell us anything quantitative about diet because of dearth of documents, and the concentration of what documents there are on the specific rather than on the general, and virtually never, on the comprehensive. In short, the major part of the diet of the majority of the people is probably what they grew, scrounged, begged, or stole, and will never appear in documents. Exit the historian for the present problem.

The archaeologist is in a similar predicament for his evidence is again particular, related to that rubbish pit which survives, and, again, the bulk of a diet may well leave no archaeological remains. He, like the historian, can give some qualitative ideas, but cannot approach a quantitative estimate.

The answer is to consult the dietician. There is archaeological evidence that the twelfth century inhabitants of Barchester lived (skeletons), and continued to do so for sometimes up to 40 years without discernable diseases caused by dietary deficiency. The historical evidence bears this out. Diet is now fairly well understood, and the fact that these inhabitants lead a moderately healthy life tells us that they had a daily intake of so many calories, a minimum of so many grammes of protein and fat, sufficient vitamins, and so on. Humanity has therefore appeared, but with it the spectre of Hopkins' second law, that of "Futile Returns". This states that a large amount of effort and research can be saved by deciding before you start whether you are going to accept the results of your research even if they are nonsensical. In other words you should decide the limits

within which you are willing to allow your answers to be. But, if you can do that, you might as well publish these allowable limits as your answer, and save yourself a lot of unnecessary research. This applies in the case of diet. To try to estimate the relative amount of foodstuffs taken in by medieval man is stupid because these must be within the limits of a subsistence diet, and a modern dietician will estimate this better than you ever can. To try to estimate the relative importance of fish and red meat in medieval diet, from archaeological and historical sources is a perfectly reasonable thing to do.

Having tried to put forward one individual view of the difference between history and archaeology, their materials and methods, I want to deal with humanity and finish by alienating any readers who may still be with me.

"People of flesh and blood," has been the slogan of many of our great excavators and historians. It can still be heard. How people can have got away with such utter sanctimonious twaddle for so long amazes me. "We are searching for the real living people of the past" concludes a rousing lecture, and the lecturer leaves the hall, having spoken a few kind words to the organizing committee, and avoided the general public, to return to editing his text, or his secluded typology. If these scholars really wanted to study people of flesh and blood then they would start with their neighbours who are having their evening row over drinks in the garden, or the young couple who have suddenly disappeared from the narrow lane into the hedge, or the unsteady customers leaving the Blue Boar at 11 p.m. People of flesh and blood are best studied when alive rather than dead, though in a few instances clean bones do have an advantage over messy bodies. They are better studied *now* through sociology and anthropology rather than *then* by archaeology. I confess to a complete fascination in people, but I prefer to study them on the hoof, and I hope that I have never even remotely pretended that playing with Roman coins will ever help in this fascination or be more than an enthralling past-time.

So we are back at the beginning, what we are doing, and why and how we are doing it, and the only advance that can be claimed is that a few nonsensical alibis have been unsettled. What we need is far more careful thought on these subjects, but preferably expressed together with good solid examples which people can grasp and test for themselves.

A footnote—gratuitous insult—or disclaimer, to alienate more readers. The one class of person who should never be allowed anywhere near analytical thought or dissection of method is the student, be-

cause he has, as yet, nothing of his own to analyse or dissect. Especially the student who likes to read destructive articles like this which gives him lots of sticks wherewith to beat his elders, plenty of things

vaporously to argue over, and plenty of excuses for never actually getting down to anything. To turgid undergraduate theses on what we all ought to do—*Anathema Sint.*

## Wealth of the Roman World

ARE YOU a “goodies” archaeologist? In other words, do you prefer archaeological finds to be big, beautiful and made of gold (or at least silver)? If so, you will not need to be encouraged to visit the exhibition *Wealth of the Roman World* at the British Museum. Here is a unique collection of treasures from the period 300-700 A.D. Old friends like the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial can be found alongside new finds like the Water Newton Treasure — the earliest hoard of Christian ‘church’ plate ever found, and on show to the public for the first time. Other great musums have made their contribution: for example the Chalice of Antioch (once thought to be the Holy Grail) from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and two hoards from the State Hermitage Museum, Leningrad. There are even rarely seen treasures from the vaults of a German bank—does the B.M. have a numbered account? Other treasures, too numerous to be mentioned individually, make this a display not to be missed.

But perhaps you find such a display of wealth “all a bit much.” Does the exhibition have anything to offer you? I believe it does. Behind the dazzling display there lurks much serious historical information and comment. The excellent commentary to the finds really brings to life the confused period from A.D. 300 to 700. The fall of the Western Roman Empire, the survival of Byzantium, the rise and fall of the Persian Sassanian Empire, the invasions of Goths, Franks and Lombards, and finally the explosion of the Arabs in the seventh century are all there. The story is told via the coinage — a valuable source of political information, and not merely dating evidence — and highlighted by the more spectacular relics of their periods. One suspects that the “goodies” are just the bait, and the real aim is to teach us all something. And why not? — the public’s knowledge about this period probably owes more to *1066 and All That* than to Gibbon and his successors. If the treasures sweeten the pill, so much the better.



Silver ewer of the early 5th century A.D., showing Christ healing the blind.

The exhibition is very well laid out to meet this dual need. The standard of design is excellent: objects can be *seen*, labels can be *read*, and the overall structure can be easily grasped (which is more than one can say, for example, for the recent Pompeii exhibition). You may be surprised that it is all fitted into such a small space, but don't be misled — there is an awful lot to see. Well worth a visit for treasure-hunters and serious historians alike.

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