

Commentary

by GROMATICUS

The urban peasant

I LIKE TO USE the excuse of a new volume to force myself to look beyond the day-to-day confines of post-excavation work, publication, or production of this magazine, to look at wider issues for a while. Having said that, I found myself scratching my head wondering what the wider issues are in 1984. Certainly, the perennial questions are still with us – how do we persuade the rest of the community (local and national government, developers, etc.) to take archaeology more seriously, how do we ensure the results of archaeological work are made available to those who need them or are interested, and within a reasonable time, the question of secure and adequate funding, and strivings for professional status. But perhaps all these are symptoms of a single deeper question – what is archaeology *for*? We may feel that archaeology is worth doing for its own sake, but if we are to bid for public support, money and practical help, we need to make our case.

The answer to the question depends, of course, on where you stand. The academic may say, for example, that it provides training in dealing with intractable data, but when I was at school a similar claim was made for Latin, and look what happened to that. At the other end of the scale, many of us may be grateful to officials who see archaeology as a cheap way of mopping up the unemployed (we don't require much capital investment, do we?). The 'mainstream' answer, of providing information about our past, simply moves the question along one step – what *use* is information about our past? One common view is that learning about the mistakes of the past will help us avoid disaster in the future. This presupposes that we can recognise a 'mistake' in the archaeological record, and that collectively we learn from our mistakes. For example, would a better understanding of the collapse of the Mayan civilisation help us to solve any of today's pressing

world-scale problems?

Another view is that archaeology promotes social cohesion by putting us more in touch with our roots. For me at least, it feels that roots are concentrated in the soil within a few miles of my home, not in classical Greece or Rome. If this phenomenon – the *Urban Peasant* syndrome – is widespread, then the sort of archaeology that matters is the local, as much as the big set-piece site, and dissemination of results to the general public is vital. A more recent idea is that what is really interesting is our interpretation – witness the changing fashions for invasions or indigeneous development, and the current trend for studying changes in material culture as ways of establishing, maintaining or challenging power over ones fellows. Perhaps we should take a step back from the data, and see what we can learn about ourselves from the way we interpret them?

A new look

MY REQUEST in the Summer issue for ideas on how the design of *the London Archaeologist* could be improved has provoked no response. I hope this means you are all satisfied with the present layout: the Publication Committee interpreted the silence in this way when it met recently and recommended that we do not re-design the magazine. We have, however, changed the layout of the contents page, for purely practical reasons. The old layout was a nightmare to produce using our new computer program, involving the cutting and sticking of many small pieces of film. The new layout is designed, I must admit, for editorial convenience, but I hope you find it useful too. Minor changes within the 'two-column' pattern could be accommodated if there is a strong demand for them.

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AN INDEX to Volume 4 is being prepared and will be circulated to subscribers with a future issue.

Excavation Round-up 1984

DIRECTORS, secretaries and other people concerned with excavations carried out in 1984 are asked to send a short report to the co-ordinator, Beth Richardson, D.U.A., Museum of London,

E.C.2, for inclusion in the Spring issue. It would be appreciated if they could be modelled on the ones in Vol. 4, No. 14, and if they could be sent in by 31 December.