

Commentary

by Gromaticus

WELL, we lost. Six months ago (*LA* 7, no. 10, 250) I wrote about the threat to the Science-Based Archaeology Committee posed by its transfer from the Science and Engineering Research Council to the Natural Environmental Research Council in the reorganisation of the Research Councils. Despite intensive lobbying, the Committee is no more, and British archaeology is poorer, intellectually as well as financially, for its passing. Some provision has been made for archaeological representation on the Earth Sciences Committee, but how well this can support the incredibly broad spectrum of science-based archaeology in Britain remains to be seen. Alternative sources of funding will undoubtedly be sought, but nothing on the same scale, modest though it seemed at the time, is in the offing. My guess is that only the 'flagship' projects, such as the Oxford Accelerator Laboratory, are likely to survive, together with some of the more 'earthy' applications. But we live in hope.

Thinking about this, I wondered whether this financial change in archaeology, which was made (as far as I know) for purely administrative reasons, mirrors a psychological change that is going on in archaeology itself. I refer to a feeling of a swing away from 'science' in archaeology that has been around recently. I don't mean a wish to give up those scientific techniques (for example, of dating and sourcing materials) that archaeologists have come to know and rely on, but a shift away from a scientific approach to archaeological thinking and reasoning. To my mind, archaeology is about the creative interaction between theories about people in the past on one hand, and data derived from the remains that they have left behind, on the other. This interaction does not take place willy-nilly, but needs a framework or ground rules — what

Binford once called 'middle-range theory' but is really just the application of general scientific method to our particular field of study.

There has always been a certain amount of 'local difficulty' in this area, from Jacquetta Hawkes' view, expressed in the '60s, that such an approach is inappropriate for studying people, to the view that "it's my data and I'll do what I like with it" expressed by archaeologists when challenged over the use of a particular statistical or analytical technique. The feeling in the air now is that the whole business of testing theories rigorously against relevant data is somehow unnecessary and perhaps rather too much to ask of archaeology. This seems to derive, at least in part, from the realisation that data are what we choose to record, in contrast to the 'total record' that was a myth of the '70s. This means that they are dependent on theory, and therefore (the argument runs) subservient to it. This is where I part company with the argument. Because we choose some aspects of our material to be our data, that does not make them dependent on our choice; only our record of them depends on our choice. The material evidence is therefore of equal status to the theory, and data must be sought that is capable of disproving it. If we abandon this approach we are in danger of writing fairy stories, not history.

Fieldwork Round-up

WE HAD hoped to be able to distribute the special issue containing the 1994 *Round-up* with this issue, but because of delays in the submission of some entries, this has not been possible. We hope instead to distribute it with the Autumn issue, as last year. Meanwhile we thank all those who have sent details of their fieldwork, and promise them a free copy of the *Round-up* when it is published.

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

THE TWENTY-SIXTH A.G.M. of the *London Archaeologist* was held on Tuesday 16 May in the Lecture Theatre of the Institute of Archaeology. The following officers were elected — Editor, Clive Orton; Secretary, Nesta Caiger; Advertising and Promotion, Betsey Kentish; Subscriptions, Shiela Broomfield; Managing Editor, Nicholas Fuentes. The auditor, Tony Snitter, was thanked and re-

elected. Representatives from local societies were re-elected to serve on the Publication Committee, there being no vacancies this year. The accounts for the year showed a substantial surplus, due to increased income and reduced production costs, although postage was up. After the close of business, Chris Green spoke on 'John Dwight and the Fulham Pottery'.