

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Travelling and arriving

“To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive”. This quotation from Robert Louis Stevenson came into my mind recently, and I wondered if it could be applied to archaeology. The terms need some explanation, of course: ‘travelling’ becomes the doing of archaeology, while ‘arriving’ refers to the results of archaeology, the conclusions that we reach at the end of the doing. In other words, where does the value of archaeology lie – in the doing of it or in the answers that it provides to archaeological questions.

Put like that, it seems obvious. What we want are answers, whether to small tactical questions about the stratigraphy of a particular site, or to large strategic questions, such as the origins of Roman London.

To consider the contrasting view, let’s look at two aspects of archaeology that might be thought to come from opposing ends of the spectrum: community archaeology and the undergraduate teaching of archaeology. Community archaeology has been one of the success stories of recent years, but not primarily for the academic results that it has achieved. What it has often achieved is to give participants a heightened sense of place and of the time depth associated with it. They feel that they have contributed to the story of their locale, and in doing so have become more part of it. The actual finds may not be spectacular; what matters is that the participants made them themselves. As community archaeology has developed and matured over the years, a strange thing has begun to happen: the pieces of the jigsaw are starting to come together. No one piece of evidence seems significant in itself, but when enough are gathered together, patterns start to emerge if you look for them. A good example of this is the Jigsaw Cambridgeshire project (see *British Archaeology* January/February 2014), which links and supports local archaeology groups, and also sets up new Archaeology Action Groups (AAGs) across the county. Training

forms an important part of the programme, as does access to specialist equipment.

Now let’s look at the traditional archaeology degree. We know that each year far more archaeology students graduate than can be absorbed by the profession (whose numbers have even fallen slightly during the years of the recession). But we still encourage students to take up the subject, and indeed many do so with no intention of making archaeology their career. So what’s the selling point (apart from the prospect of summers spent in exotic locations, supported by fieldwork grants)? The pitch that is often made is that studying archaeology encourages transferable skills, such as teamwork, problem-solving and analytical skills. It is sometimes said that archaeology is one of the rare disciplines where an undergraduate or master’s dissertation may make an important contribution to knowledge, but even so, the emphasis here is on the journey rather than the destination.

Where does commercial archaeology fit into this model that I am building? Extending the metaphor, the professional archaeologist might be seen as a surveyor or map-maker, producing a thought-scape by discovering, analysing and presenting new data. If time and money permits, they may choose to travel that new terrain for themselves in search of new destinations.

Finally, two questions: do we ever arrive, and should we ever arrive? In a sense, we never do arrive; it’s like climbing a hill and seeing a higher one appear in front of us as we reach the summit. There never seems to be a final answer to our question, only more questions. And, of course, there are those surveyors/map-makers, continually laying out fresh terrain in front of us as they gather more data. Indeed, the thought of finally arriving at a destination becomes a rather depressing one: nothing more to do, nothing more to achieve. That just doesn’t feel right. So we press on,

finding new and interesting land-marks, and hopefully showing them to others, but never reaching a final destination where we can say “that’s it”. And all the time, we are travelling in good company, not by ourselves, which is perhaps the best part of it.

London Archaeological Prize 2014

This issue sees the launch of the London Archaeological Prize for 2014, for publications in 2012 and 2013 relating to London’s archaeology. Information on nominations can be found on the back cover, with full details available on the website. A judging panel is being appointed. They will look forward to seeing your entries.

Publication grants

Once again, the LA Publication Committee has decided to make some of its funds available to enable authors to bring projects to successful publication, *via* the City of London Archaeological Trust’s grant scheme. This year our award goes towards a project on Health, Life and Death in Victorian London’s East End; CoLAT will also support projects on the Tudor dovecote at Fulham Palace and on Religion and ritual imagery on Roman pottery from London.

Advance notice

The Annual Lecture and Meeting of the *London Archaeologist* will be held at 7 p.m. on Thursday 15th May at the Institute of Archaeology, 31–34 Gordon Square, London WC1. MOLA’s Sadie Watson will present the Annual Lecture on the important Roman and medieval Bloomberg site. A formal notice will be given in the next issue, but please make a note in your diaries now.

Fieldwork Round-up

Contributions to the *Fieldwork Round-up* for 2013 should be sent to Cath Maloney, Museum of London, 46 Eagle Wharf Road, London N1 7EE. They should be modelled on the ones in the 2012 *Round-up*, and should be sent digitally as well as on paper.