

## PURPOSE IN PREHISTORY

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It may well be that some of archaeology's most ardent devotees believe that it is better not to reflect on the nature and purpose of their subject, but to practise it. They may think archaeological scholarship in the study to be good, work in the field a great deal better, but any attempt at general analysis, any survey of the different roads which the subject may follow, a regrettable waste of time.

I have an innate sympathy with this point of view and yet am determined to overcome it. At convulsive times like the present the practioners of all learned subjects should take stock of their position, making clear on what grounds, apart from their own satisfaction, they claim the right to survive—and even to receive public support.

In order to judge the present nature and future prospects of archaeology I must, I think, attempt to show it in historical perspective. This I shall do with the special intention of discovering how the study of the early history of man has served the needs and been coloured by the complexion of each successive age. In recent historical surveys of archaeology, I have noticed the assumption of a steady progress in virtue, the assumption that the work of a century or two centuries ago was in some absolute sense less good, less worthy of respect, than the work of our own day. I want to suggest that this is not necessarily true and that such an over-simplified idea of progress is an outmoded inheritance from the habits of thought of the 19th century. Of course individual techniques do show steady improvement; excavation and the analysis of its results, for example, have become more and more accurate and ingenious—but I am thinking in wider terms than these. I am convinced that the pursuit of any subject must meet the needs of its age and in doing so cannot be said to be either worse or better than what has gone before or what follows.

Let me give an instance. In the Middle Ages many European countries had devised more or less fictitious and splendidly heroic histories of their past, histories well suited to an age of imagination and faith, and well able to provide the creative,

strengthening myths necessary to peoples destined to grow into nations. In Britain this legendary history told of the arrival in the island of a dispossessed Trojan prince, Brutus, who vanquished giants, gave Britain its name (derived from his own), founded a new Troy on the site of London and had many illustrious successors including both King Arthur and King Cole. Now tales of this kind are not "true" in our scientific sense, but they were invigorating myths for men and women whose habit it was to regard the whole material world as symbolic of a spiritual world, and whose idea of truth was therefore legitimately different from our own.

Then, with the impact of the Renaissance, comes the great turning point, the development of analytical thought and a new devotion to the "facts" of science. Here was the beginning of the factual antiquarianism which was to be one of the two main roots of our modern archaeology. But the antiquarianism of the 17th and 18th centuries was still unlike our own archaeological study because the society of that time, and therefore its needs, were so very different. It was still an aristocratic age, and science was an intellectual indulgence almost free from commercial or industrial associations. If the country people still all but *lived* the life of their later prehistoric forerunners and inherited something of their beliefs and rituals, they certainly did not regard them as matters for study. For their part the wealthy classes were very much concerned with aesthetics, with the beautifying of their houses and parks, and inevitably, too, were preoccupied with the classical antiquities which were the first interest of the Renaissance.

As I have suggested, there is now a strong inclination to decry their point of view and more particularly to condemn the gentlemen antiquaries for excavating only to obtain treasures for their cabinets and for thinking much of priests, warriors and kings, and little of the economic life of the people. But of course they did these things: it was what their kind of society needed. Look how imaginatively they seized upon the past and adapted it to their own culture. I am not referring merely to the return to classical forms, but to more precise adaptations; in England, for instance, the Adam brothers made use of the Palace of Diocletian at Spalato for the detail of their architecture and interior decoration, while in France discoveries in Egypt were made to contribute to the fashionable furnishings of the First Empire.

When we come to the later 18th century and the Romantic Movement, the prehistoric past comes more fully into its own. We are apt to think of the Movement as primarily literary and artistic, but essentially it was the product of an upsurge of repressed emotional impulses against the excessive domination of classicism and reason. That was why it sought darkness and mystery, and even led to the indulgence of a morbid taste for horror. To satisfy such needs an unknown prehistoric past was invaluable; its remains really were mysterious, for no man knew who had built them, while it was quite legitimate to suppose that they were to be associated with rites and practices both terrible and sublime. Although Gothicism was perhaps even more influential, prehistory was made to contribute in a strange variety of ways. Amateurs of the subject visited antiquities and loved to think of them as sacrificial altars once streaming with blood; the druids became a generally accepted and grisly ornament of our history; Blake made use of antiquarian research and speculation in both his poetry and his pictures, while William Stukeley himself, who had had so much to do with interesting his countrymen in druids, attempted to use Stonehenge and Avebury to refute the rational Deists of his day and to further religious interpretations which can certainly be described as romantic. So again, however unsympathetic to our own outlook it may be, we can see the study of the past being made to serve its age and contribute to its living culture.

Now comes the great crisis in historical thought brought about by the impact on scholarly humanism of the thought and methods of natural science. In our field this impact can be seen in the convergence of the young sciences of geology and palaeontology with the prehistory of the Old Stone Age. In the famous disputes arising from the discoveries of Boucher de Perthes in the Seine gravels, it was geologists who sat in judgment; similarly in England geologists and palaeontologists were largely concerned in the fierce controversies as to whether or not human remains had been found in association with those of extinct animals at Torquay and Brixham. The resulting adoption by some prehistorians of modes of thought proper to natural scientists demanded, and still demands, the neglect of all non-mechanical actions and creations, of all those odd doings—dare I say the exercise of free will—prompted by man's intellect and spiritual intuitions.

As naturally as the classical and prehistoric monuments had

been made to nourish the culture of the 17th and 18th centuries, the scientific approach to the study of early man satisfied the naturalistic optimism of the later 19th century. Nothing was more in harmony with the conception of inevitable progress towards an earthly millennium than the proof that beings as clever as the scientists themselves had evolved from apelike ancestors. Nothing could give more confidence in an irresistible advance of mechanical and technical skills than the recognition of the gradual improvement of the most primitive human tools.

Yet at the same time the 19th century saw an unprecedented development of history as one of the humanities; it was one of the most conspicuous new elements of the intellectual life of the age. So it is that for the last century at least prehistory has been drawn along by two horses: a humanistic and a scientific beast. They kept quite closely in step, and all was well for so long as it was accepted that the coach behind them was the vehicle of *history*, that prehistory was in fact only a part of history and therefore remote from the natural sciences both in its purposes and its values; a subject not generally controlled by natural laws nor amenable to controlled experiment.

While this is understood, nothing can be more desirable than the improvement of scientific archaeological techniques in the service of prehistory. Let the chemists analyse metals, let the botanists count pollen grains, the physicists make Carbon 14 and fluorine tests until they are all exhausted—let as much as possible of the energy of natural scientists be diverted to help us reconstruct the story of early man. But do not let us think that this reconstruction of history is comparable to the study of the human body and its evolution or to the exploration of the mechanics of mind by psychologists.

There has of late been a conscious attempt to include history among the so-called social sciences, an attempt which has led to an eager desire to find some constant and measurable factor in the welter of human tragedy and achievement. To satisfy this desire some people have found it possible to accept technological development as a standard measure of man's "progress", and the multiplication of heads, the numerical increase of the species, as a measure for his "success." I find this kind of thinking terrifying in its disregard of value. We should have to see Athens in the 5th century B.C., or 15th century Florence, as far behind any contemporary city of the American Middle West; we should have to see as the aim of all mankind the

production of the largest possible amount of edible substances to satisfy the largest number of human bellies which the earth can support. I do most earnestly hope that because it draws its evidence from material things archaeology will not be identified in the eyes of the intellectual world with this vacant materialism. Let our subject take its place among the humanities as a study primarily concerned with unique events, unique creations, not governed by the laws of natural history.

What then is the place of archaeology in the 20th century? How can it best serve the new needs of the age? First let me make it plain that I do not underweigh the value of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake. Next to artistic creation it is, I think, the noblest of the secular activities of man—as is proved by the fact that it is also the worst paid! Probably most archaeologists and prehistorians would be confident that their devotion to the subject is fully justified by the contribution which it makes to pure knowledge, and by the enjoyment which they themselves obtain for it. Most certainly I do not wish to be among those who make social utility the sole test of virtue. Nevertheless the prevalent direction of our studies should take account of the character and needs of our time. We have seen that in the past this adjustment took place without thought, but ours is a self-conscious age, and furthermore the contemporary bias towards the natural sciences may have confused us. The accumulation of fact through experiment may always be justified in those sciences because it will contribute either to high intellectual abstractions or directly to practical applications. I do not believe this to be true of archaeology. The accumulation of facts in an uncritical spirit may be entirely worthless and lead to our discredit. Is it not reasonable for a layman to say: "Why do you study the broken crockery and other rubbish of the past when not one of you could give an adequate account of the variation of domestic habits in your own culture?" Are men really more interesting when they have been dead for two thousand years? We must never fail to relate our facts to a dynamic conception of the evolution of cultures; that is to say, to the historical adventures of mankind. It is certain that the discredited but still recent idea of history as a study concerned only with great men and great events in politics, war, religion and philosophy is no longer tenable. This is the century of the common man and archaeology has received a filip because it provides material for

history which, willy nilly, speaks chiefly of the everyday life of everyday people. That is as it should be, for the moment at least, but even this broader understanding of the functions of history must remain dynamic. It seems to me that a vast amount of the facts now being accumulated by sociologists and by those anthropologists belonging to the so-called functional school are not only useless, but actually damp down the intellectual zest like a barrow load of grass on a bonfire. I hope that archaeologists will not help to fill that barrow.

Such are my personal feelings about the work of specialists in archaeological research. But this is the century of the common man. Just as in the 18th and 19th centuries archaeology was adding to the art collections, the architecture, interior decoration and furniture of the wealthy and aristocratic, so it seems that in the twentieth we must take deliberate pains to make it add something to the life of a democratic society. Our subject has social responsibilities and opportunities which it can fulfil through school education, through museums and books and through all the instruments of what is often rather disagreeably called "mass communications"—the press, broadcasting, films and now television. If archaeology is to make its proper contribution to contemporary life and not risk sooner or later being jettisoned by society, all its followers, even the narrowest specialists, should not be too proud to take part in its diffusion. I would go further and say that we should not forget the problems of popular diffusion in planning our research. For example, we should act on the knowledge that for many forms of popularisation it is necessary to be able to give a reasonably reliable visual rendering of ancient man and the setting of his life. Anyone who has attempted such reconstructions has been made to realise what huge gaps there are in our information about these things—many of them gaps which it is quite possible to fill.

If general education, books and all the agencies of mass communication are to be the means of the wider diffusion of our knowledge, what are its ends? How do I justify my demand for the expenditure of so much of our limited resources of time, energy, imagination and intellect? To me it seems that there are four principal ways in which we can serve urgent contemporary needs. I will place these in what I judge to be a mounting order of importance. Lowest, then, I should put the now familiar claim that archaeology is valuable because it vastly

extends the perspectives of our historical outlook, making it possible to view our own affairs against the whole background of human history instead of a misleading drop-cloth representing only the last few thousand years. This, it is suggested, helps to give us a sense of proportion, encourages optimism—or, if not optimism, then a fatalistic acceptance of the fact that ours is not the first civilisation to have faced extinction!

Next I should place the much-needed inspiration we can give, if we put enough imaginative fire into our interpretation of the past, in making manifest the magnitude and variety of human achievement: a greatness and tenacity in man which offset his sins and follies. It can be shown in what diverse ways men have been able to live and to find satisfaction, and by this display of varied civilisations, some dazzling, some materially simple yet spiritually rich, we may do something to replenish our own impoverished and over-materialistic values.

Third in order of importance I should place a possible function of archaeological discovery which in our own time has been almost entirely neglected: that of supplying creative artists of all kinds with fresh material for their work. We must be careful here. I do not want to see megalithic villas adding to the confusion on our by-pass roads or a housing estate of artificial cave-dwellings. It is true, too, that modern painters and sculptors have already found inspiration in primitive art, but it has mainly been the art of contemporary primitive peoples. I suggest that if we could bring a clearer imaginative illumination to our own knowledge and discoveries we, as much as our predecessors in the 18th century, could furnish not only painters, architects and sculptors, but also writers and poets with ideas to be transmuted into new and living forms.

Finally, and I have always believed this to be the most vital social duty of archaeology, we must use our understanding of the antiquity of man and the continuity of history to counter the terrible sense of human insecurity which in spite of the welfare state is characteristic of our times. Industrial populations cut off from their natural roots in a countryside, and from their place within a small community, adrift in a world changing with unheard of rapidity, seem inclined to turn to the past of their nation and of mankind for a substitute. I would go so far as to say that this turning to the past provides a partial substitute for religion. Indeed it has interested me elsewhere to make a comparison between our most famous ancient

monuments and centres of Christian pilgrimage. Crowds flock to them equally, there grow up the same hostelrys and refreshment booths, the same stalls selling souvenirs, images and relics. Although tourists visiting ancient monuments are less clear than pilgrims what it is they seek, it is really something very similar. They, too, are looking for some way to relate themselves to the universe and in so doing to experience awe and wonder. The distinction is that our tourists must satisfy these cravings by identifying themselves with their own human ancestors and feeling wonder at the ancient works of *man*.

These, then, are my conclusions. That we should never forget that archaeology works for prehistory and that prehistory as a part of history is one of the humanities. That we must beware of indulging in an aimless accumulation of facts which may be becoming to the natural sciences, but which cannot make any significant contribution to our understanding of history. We should play our part in the pursuit of knowledge and of truth for their own sake; such a part satisfies the legitimate pride of scholars. But I am convinced that it is equally our high responsibility to broadcast our findings and so secure their absorption in the main stream of a living culture. We should not be satisfied by the popular exposition of factual knowledge alone; such appeals to the intellect are useful, but far more can be done through the imagination. We must rouse all those who are capable of it (and perhaps we should start with ourselves) to a lively awareness of the often renewed glories of art and ritual, of the drama of the rise and fall of great civilisations, and of the endless fecundity of human existence. So we can continue to deepen the historical understanding of our society, help to support a wavering sense of value, provide some immediate intellectual and sensuous enjoyment, and perhaps even contribute something to the stuff of fresh artistic creation. Above all we can enable men to assure themselves that they are not mere creatures of a day, of a racketsy and uncertain day, but part of a mysterious continuum uniting past, present and future.