

Commentary

By GROMATICUS

Archaeology at the crossroads

I HAVE BEEN WATCHING with fascination the slow progress of archaeology towards "professional status", which has now reached the stage of an Association for the promotion of an Institute of Field Archaeologists (APIFA). If all goes well, next year this creature will pupate and emerge as a splendid new body . . . of what sort? In order that the new body, what ever it may be, should be as widely based and as representative as possible, APIFA is asking all those interested, both paid and unpaid archaeologists, to join it and take part in its discussions. I too urge you to obtain a copy of its discussion paper (send a large sae to APIFA, c/o 71 Basinghall Street, E.C.2) and join the debate — if you don't have your say now, don't say later that you weren't asked.

It seems to me that our views on this subject must be influenced by two questions: (i) what is a "profession"? and (ii) do we want archaeology to be like that? I suppose that at the heart of the idea of a profession lies the idea of a close agent-client relationship, in which the agent can subsume his interests with those of the client and act on his behalf (e.g. it is in the doctor's interest that the patient recovers, and in the lawyer's that the defendant is acquitted). The client is willing to pay for services because he is receiving, not only expertise, but also a certain amount of commitment to his cause. In archaeology, who is the client: the developer, the site or archaeological record itself, the State as paymaster, the general public, or who? In other words, to whom, ultimately and morally, is the archaeologist responsible?

Secondly, do we want to be like the existing professions? This may seem a silly question, in a society in which the professional has generally high pay and high status. But his pay is a product of clients' needs for his services, their willingness to pay, and his ability to restrict entry to his profession. Since no-one *needs* archaeologists (in the way that a man with tooth-ache needs a dentist), the cynic might see the formation of a professional Institute as an attempt to increase the

price of archaeologists by restricting their numbers. How could this work without some legal or institutional backing to make clients use Institute members (*cf* the position of solicitors and conveyancing)? The most likely outcome would be unemployed archaeologists and lost sites. And what about status — is it any more than exaggerated respect for "experts" in an expert-ridden society, reinforced by long strings of initials the meaning of which we are not quite sure? Is this altogether healthy?

To those not blinded by the glamour of the word "professional", the facade appears already to be crumbling. There is widespread dissatisfaction with (e.g.) architects and town planners (not necessarily from the clients, but from those who have to live with the results), solicitors are under attack for cloaking simple tasks in professional mystique, and even medical ethics are not as simple as they once seemed, as a moment's thought about heart transplants shows — is it ethical to save one client's life if the same money could have saved lives of (say) ten other people (non-clients)? A movement seems to be growing to take the control over peoples lives away from the "experts" and to give it back to the people. Surely, specialist skills will still be needed — we are not likely to see amateur brain surgeons — but control over these skills is the real issue. If this is the case, archaeology may be trying to jump on the bandwagon just as the wheels start to drop off.

This does not mean that I do not want to see a self-regulatory body for archaeologists, rather that I do not want it to imitate the mistakes of the past. What we need is a new sort of body that will enable archaeologists really to serve the public and meet needs that we rarely discuss like the need for individual and corporate identity, and which will integrate them into society, not cut them off from it. With imagination and nerve we could show the way, while without them we could condemn archaeology to increasing irrelevance to the real needs of real people, in an ivory tower of professional and academic purity. Its up to you.