

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Memories are made of this . . . and this . . . and this

Imagine, if you can, what life would be like without memory. So many familiar things would go; above all, perhaps, the ability to learn through building on acquired knowledge and practices, and through that to progress to whatever ends we might set ourselves. The same might be said at a collective as well as an individual level; without a collective memory we are condemned to continue to make the mistakes of the past, and to fail to make progress. As George Santayana said 'Progress ... depends on retentiveness ... Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to fulfil it.'

By now, I hope you can see where this is leading. Archaeology, like any other discipline, has its own memory, through which it learns and progresses towards greater understanding of our past and indeed of ourselves. This memory is, of course, what is commonly known as 'the archive'. This itself has many aspects: what used to be called the 'paper archive' (now, but not entirely, digital), consisting of reports, notes, catalogues, etc., etc.; the 'physical archive' – artefacts, ecofacts, samples of many sorts; and what I call the 'human archive', consisting of the things in the heads of archaeologists which they have not yet got round to committing to a more permanent form (as I have found to my cost when trying to write up 'legacy' sites of dead or disappeared archaeologists). But that's a story for another day; today I want to concentrate on the problems and issues of the physical archive.

The physical archive is in many ways the bedrock of our discipline. New ideas and fashions may come and go, but (in principle) we can turn to it to verify or dismiss those ideas, or indeed to create new ones. This is not to deny the importance of fresh excavations, but simply to reinforce the point that in the future as many discoveries will be made in the archive as in the field. This raises questions of accessibility, for example

how well organised is a particular archive, and how possible is it to find one's way around it, or around those who guard access to it ("keep on the right side of the gatekeepers" as I used to teach students). This, in turn, raises further questions of terminology and its standardisation, or lack of it, an issue which we significantly failed to grasp in the 1970s, and which I for one have regretted ever since.

Even more fundamental is the question of what goes into the archive in the first place, and, increasingly asked, what should stay there. Stores are either full or they are rapidly filling up, and the question is often raised (not usually by archaeologists) "do we really need to keep all this stuff?". We need to have our answers ready. The days of keeping everything have passed (if they ever existed), and now categories of material, such as ceramic building material, can be recorded on site according to agreed methods and terminologies, and then safely discarded. Now the issue arises about materials that are already in store, particularly ceramics and animal bone.

Let's suppose that we are faced with the problem of rationalising an archive (or whatever euphemism we use for throwing stuff away). How do we go about it? What criteria do we use? Here I rely on a seminar on the Archaeological Archives Rationalisation Project held at the Museum of London this year, but I shall ask questions rather than try to provide answers.

I start at a broad level, like a wide-meshed sieve, and work my way down to finer detail. First, are there some sites whose physical archive need not be retained at all? Certainly, some sites are considered more important than others; some may be regarded as iconic or 'super-sites', while others are merely 'repetitive'. Does this mean that those at the bottom of the scale can be discarded, or could future discoveries move them up the scale? And how does the quality of the paper archive affect this assessment?

Moving to a finer mesh, we come to features and contexts on a site. Once again, we can recognise that some are more important (in terms of finds) than others, but does this mean that finds from the less important can be considered for discard? If so, where do we draw the line? Can a context be more important for one class of find than another, and what does that say about maintaining the integrity of an assemblage?

Finally, let's look at the issue of the state of preservation of objects. Generally, well-preserved objects are considered more 'useful' than less well-preserved ones, and so more worthy of retention. But what does that say about objects that are poorly preserved but rare, or show some intrinsic point of interest? And how fixed is the concept of 'useful'; can future discoveries make an object more rather than less useful?

I'll touch briefly on the topic of sampling. Can we reduce the volume of an archive by retaining only carefully selected samples of bulk materials? In principle, yes, but in practice the skills needed to do so and record the outcomes are rare, so this would be a dangerous route to follow.

Where does all this leave us? We need an informed discussion, the outcome of which will be important to us all. It's every archaeologist's problem, so get thinking and discussing. May the outcome be fruitful. Above all, may it lead to accessible and useful archives, because if we don't use them the danger is that we may lose them.

Fieldwork and Publication Round-up

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