

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Coping with cornucopia

I wonder if, like me, you were fascinated and excited by a recent (January) series of TV programmes, in which the physical appearances of three well-known human ancestors were recreated by a team of scientists and artists. As well as by the skill of the artists in creating such life-like figures (one almost felt that they could move), I was impressed by the wide range of scientific techniques that are now available to help archaeologists 'put the flesh on the bones' of our past.

The programmes were followed by news of the recreation of 'Cheddar man' (Mesolithic) with brown skin and blue eyes. For some reason, the knowledge that we can infer eye colour from DNA taken from bones seems to have struck a particular chord with many people.

After the excitement there comes a time of quiet reflection. My first thought, once my excitement had died down, was 'how much did it all cost?' That's probably a pointless question, because the costs of such techniques are falling all the time, and subsequent projects are likely to be much cheaper than the pioneering ones. Nevertheless, I cannot foresee a time when such approaches become a matter of routine. This feeling was reinforced when I visited the new Mithras display at the Bloomberg building. Fantastic, I thought, but who else will be able to afford to do anything like it? (Astute readers may by now be able to detect that I was brought up in an era of

rationing, and it has stayed with me.)

Could we be approaching an era of 'two-tier' archaeology, where some of us can afford the new scientific techniques that continue to arrive, while the rest of us cannot, and have to fall back on 'old-fashioned' approaches? If so, how will the favoured projects be chosen? This question reminds me of the days back in the 1970s when the allocation of funds for radiocarbon dates seemed to be based more on the seniority of the applicant than on the merit of the application (that's probably grossly unfair, but it's how it felt then). Nowadays, that situation has improved immensely, which gives me some hope for the future.

Let's be optimistic and suppose that I am wrong and that, as prices continue to fall, techniques become more widely available and outcomes become more precise. For example, how precise might radiocarbon dating become in the next 10 or 20 years? What then would be the implications for archaeology? First, there would be a massive increase in the volume of data produced. And it will not be a linear increase, because each new dataset will have to be compared to others, as well as analysed in its own right.

Add to this the burgeoning data that has already come from contract archaeology and is likely to come from new sources such as Lidar, and archaeology is truly heading into the realms of 'big data'. Can archaeologists cope with this? Some no doubt will,

but others will struggle. My favourite feedback comment when I taught data analysis to archaeology students was 'I took up archaeology to get away from this sort of stuff'. I didn't think you could then, and you certainly won't be able to in the future.

On the other hand, suppose we have just a handful of exemplar projects. How much reliance can we place on them? How representative will they be of the past populations that we seek to study? These are very difficult questions, to which there are no obvious answers. I hope we will not be in a position of having to say 'so what?' to future exciting discoveries.

Are there deeper implications for archaeology as a discipline? Archaeology, especially prehistory, has always been a generalising discipline. We have to generalise about, say, the Neolithic revolution, because we lack the fine detail of events in space and time that would enable us to go further.

But suppose that we could track them in terms of individuals and their life-times, through, for example, stable-isotope analysis (the movement of individuals) and increased radiocarbon precision (pinning down events to generational or even shorter time scales). In a talk by Professor Alasdair Whittle that I attended recently, he suggested that this may be beginning to be possible; that we could, so to speak, take the 'pre' out of prehistory and begin to write the 'history' of our deeper past. Now there's a really exciting idea, but are we up to it?

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

London Archaeologist's 49th AGM was held on Thursday 17th May at UCL Institute of Archaeology.

The following officers were elected: Joint Editors, Jenny Hall and Diana Briscoe; Managing Editor, Peter Rowsome; Secretary, Becky Wallower; Treasurer, Alastair Ainsworth; Membership Secretary, Jo Udall. Re-elected to the Publication Committee

were Sinead Marshall, Daniel Nesbitt, Victoria Ridgeway and Alison Telfer, and Jonathan Gardner, co-opted last year, was also elected. There are vacancies for the position of Marketing Manager and for one ordinary member.

After the AGM, Jessica Bryan, Senior Archaeologist at MOLA, described archaeological interventions that are part of major infrastructure works along

the route of the Thames Tideway Tunnel. She highlighted a likely ferry crossing slipway discovered on Putney foreshore; a medieval boat and mill remains, as well as post-medieval structures made from ships' timbers, at Chambers Wharf; and, at Deptford Church Street, a variety of evidence of 18th and 19th century occupation, from market gardens to a bakery.