

Commentary

by Gromaticus

Tell me a story

Well, I got it wrong in my last *Commentary*, when I expressed the hope that the political situation would become much clearer by the time I came to write the next one. It's now January, I'm facing my next deadline, and things feel no clearer than they did when I last wrote in October. It feels futile to continue to speculate, so I need a completely new topic.

What better topic than to look at our aspirations for archaeology in 2019 and beyond, both for London and for the country as a whole? I've always felt that the outcome of archaeology should be for the benefit of the community as a whole, not just for archaeologists. So what do we bring to the party that others do not? What can we contribute to general well-being in such uncertain times?

I surprised myself by discovering, as I thought about it, that my answer was 'stories'. I was surprised, because back in my working career, especially in the early days, I felt rather dismissive of archaeologists who were, to my mind, tellers of 'fairy stories'. Archaeology, I told myself, is about data – its collection, analysis, presentation and interpretation; and indeed I built my career on studying how these tasks could be done 'properly'. But, over the years, I've come to see the value of stories in our lives, both the personal and the collective ones:

- Who are we?

- How did we come to be where we are?

- Why are we who we are?

In all our attempts to answer these questions, the telling and re-telling of stories play an important part, and archaeology can 'reach the parts that others cannot' (to revise an old advert).

However, stories must still be based firmly on evidence, which itself comes from data. We are at liberty to make up any version of our past that we wish, but without firm supporting evidence, it will not last, and will not guide us in an uncertain future. Archaeology has always had plenty of data (sometimes it felt like too much), and today it has more than ever before.

In a recent *Commentary* (LA 15.05, Summer 2018, 122), I discussed briefly what I called a 'cornucopia' of data from modern techniques such as high-resolution dating, ancient DNA and (not explicitly mentioned) stable-isotope analysis, to mention just a few of the growing sources of data. Add to these, the revelations of last summer's drought. So we have plenty of data, but do we know what to do with it? To quote the polymath Henri Poincaré:

Science is built up with facts, as a house is with stones. But a collection of facts is no more a science than a heap of stones is a house.¹

Substitute 'archaeology' for 'science' and 'data' for 'facts', and there you have it. It's worth noting too that not all

the data we need come from within archaeology itself, but from other disciplines too. We can provide the time-depth, but other disciplines, such as ecology, can focus more on the present, and together we can try to look into the future.

This brings us to the important question of how we can progress from being collectors of stones (data) to being architects (story-tellers)? The means, I believe, is through the asking of questions – ones that make us look at our data in a new light, bringing them together in different ways.

What we need are the creative questions that make us re-assess what we think we already know, and to bring new data into the mix. One can see signs of this nationally, on topics such as the nature of the so-called 'neolithic revolution'² and the nature of rural settlement in the Roman period.³ What are needed are similar big questions about the nature and development of London and of Londoners, about who we were and what we might become. Who will ask these questions? Might they be part of the legacy of the LA@50 Conference?

1. H Poincaré *Science and Hypothesis* (1905) 101.

2. For example, see K Ray and J Thomas *Neolithic Britain: the transformation of social worlds*, OUP (2018).

3. For example, see A Smith, M Allen, T Brindle, M Fulford, L Lodwick and A Rohnbogner *New Visions of the Countryside of Roman Britain Volume 3: Life and Death in the Countryside of Roman Britain* Roman Society (2018).

Annual Lecture and General Meeting

We meet on 16th May this year at the Institute of Archaeology as usual. Our wine reception at 6.30 pm will be followed at 7.00 pm by a short AGM and the prestigious annual lecture.

Guy Hunt and Dan Jackson of L – P : Archaeology will present ***Keeping the lights on at Hampton Court***, discussing the finds and evidence of previous occupation discovered during the recent ring

main replacement project. This entailed multiple trenches located around the royal palace.

AGM proceedings will include the election of Officers, and the election to the Publication Committee of six Ordinary Members. We hope to elect a new Secretary and Communications Officer (title to be confirmed), and there are two vacancies for ordinary members to fill.

To discuss the positions or submit nominations (***and to send RSVPs for the reception please***), email the Secretary via the website (londonarchaeologist.org.uk/contact) or write to her at 44 Tantallon Road, London SW12 8DG.

All are welcome:

**Thursday 16th May 2019 – 6.30 pm
Institute of Archaeology, 31–34
Gordon Square, London WC1H 0PY.**