

Commentary

by Gromaticus

It's not all about the bling

As soon as one Commentary appears, I start thinking about the next. It's easy to see my next topic should be the threatening current situation for British archaeology. The main threats are obvious: the new English Planning Bill, the Environment Bill, the shortage of skilled field archaeologists and the potential closure of university Departments of Archaeology. All are likely to have progressed, but not concluded, by the time that you read this. I can do no better than quote Rob Lennox of the ClfA, who on 7 July said:

The danger is that, as Government gets closer to needing to produce a Bill, the broad shape of the reforms ends up squeezing out our ability to assess development sites for archaeological heritage... We need to get the message across to the highest levels of government that archaeology isn't just a tack on... It's about contributing to quality placemaking today, informed by what we can learn about the past.

This is fundamentally about making sure that the planning system doesn't inadvertently destroy the opportunity for society to benefit from our heritage, and puts the right systems in place [so] that professional archaeologists and local communities can contribute to sustainably creating the housing and infrastructure that we need.¹

And I recommend that you involve yourself with the Dig for Archaeology campaign (www.dig4arch.co.uk).

A time of threat can also be a time for looking at not only how we would like to be, but also how others may see us. We see a good example of this in the MOLA project *Bringing the Past to the Present* (see the last Commentary). We all need to ask what the public benefit of our archaeological activity really is, and what we can do to improve and demonstrate it, from the national down to the very local level.

Paradoxically, I am worried about some things that are said in defence of archaeology, such as 'we must preserve our archaeological treasures'. This seems to miss the point in many ways. First, we can't preserve what we don't know. We live in a Rumsfeldian world, full of what he called 'known unknowns'. How many 'treasures' have been inadvertently destroyed in the past, and how many more may be so in the future unless proper care is taken? We all love a good bit of bling, such as the Havering Hoard, but it is only the tip of a very large iceberg.

We are becoming aware that we live in a 'data economy' – the ability to collect, collate and find patterns in data is our future tool, for both good and ill. Archaeology is no exception: all the minute pieces of data that we collect contribute to a bigger picture, perhaps not now but when more come along, or when new questions are asked of them. Our knowledge of the past is an ever-growing jigsaw puzzle: to make sense of it, we need all the pieces – not just the pretty or the shiny ones! The special only makes sense against an everyday background. I might stretch the metaphor by suggesting that our HERs, an important part of our infrastructure, are the 'edge pieces' of the puzzle.

One final point is the intensely local importance of archaeology. If I'm honest, my interest in archaeological discoveries seems to follow an inverse-square law, like that of gravity – the further the site from me, the less it affects me personally. There are exceptions, like the Ness of Brodgar, but that somehow has a very 'local' or 'community' feel to it. If others feel the same, we must ensure that archaeology, its discoveries and interpretations, are spread as widely as possible.

Go compare!

My eye was caught recently by an advertisement for a portable XRF analyser. Its purpose is to provide a detailed elemental analysis of metal or mineral samples – they came to wider public notice when one helped to ascertain the geological source(s) of the Stonehenge sarsens.² This can be seen as another move of scientific

technology into archaeological practice, following resistivity, LIDAR and so on. How widespread may its use become: will every archaeological company, or even large societies, own one?

If they produce consistently reliable data on demand, it comes down to how archaeologists use the given data, or rather what data they choose. The data collected as part of a well-designed project are intended to answer specific questions, as at Stonehenge. This raises issues of experimental design – such as how many samples will be needed, which in turn depends on the inherent variability of the source material?

But that's not the end of the story. One dataset may be useful; two datasets are more than twice as useful, and so on. That is because archaeology is a comparative discipline – spotting and interpreting patterns, which can only be seen when there are many points to compare. Comparing different datasets imposes constraints of compatibility and accessibility. Are the elemental analyses conducted on the same elements and to the same standards? Or, more broadly, are assemblages compared using the same definitions and standards, such as pottery fabrics or artefact typologies. Archaeologists have often not made this easy for themselves. Can we prevent similar problems arising with new technologies?

Finally, what about accessibility? Datasets are of little use if not available to anyone who may want to compare their own datasets to them. Ideally, copies should be deposited centrally with equal access (eg at the ADS). If that is not possible, their existence should be flagged up so that access can be negotiated. If we are to progress from simple description, through multiple comparisons, to the ultimate goal of synthesis, the necessary data must be both compatible and freely available. We should share, not hoard.

Fieldwork & Bibliography Round-up

The Fieldwork and Publication Round-ups for 2020 (Volume 16, Supplement 2) will be distributed with the Autumn 2021 issue. If you have not received a copy, please contact the Membership Secretary (see the Contents page).

1. See www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-57334928 [accessed 7 July 2021].

2. D. Nash, S Greaney, T Darvill, K Whitaker & S Ulliyott 'West Woods. A provenance for the Stonehenge sarsens' *British Archaeol* **174** (2020), 18–25.