

Ethics in archaeology, 1971

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In this vigorous and outspoken article Professor Charles Thomas discusses an issue of the greatest importance to British archaeology at the moment. Though he is President of the Council for British Archaeology, he writes here as a private individual. He is at present Professor of Archaeology in the University of Leicester, but from 1 January 1972 takes up his new appointment as Director of the newly formed Institute of Cornish Studies (see Editorial, p. 250).

What is happening to archaeology in Britain at the moment? Evžen Neustupný points out ('Whither archaeology?', *Antiquity*, 1971, 34-40) that there is no doubt that the present archaeological generation, old and young, 'is living in a period of revolutionary changes in its discipline'. We know this to be true of the *content* of what we study, and it seems equally obvious that the academic *function* of archaeological research, as Bruce Trigger and others have recently shown us, requires clarification and general agreement—and that right soon, unless archaeology is to descend to the level of a hobby. I am concerned with yet another revolution in archaeology that has not so far produced much discussion in print; that of the rôle of archaeologists themselves in the context of Britain in the 1970s. No longer entirely in the game for the game's sake, so many of them are moving toward a constructive and responsible posture in the wider world of conservationism, and at such an ever-increasing speed, that those unprepared to venture forth from the ivory towers may soon find themselves to be an isolated rearguard. I would dare to talk now of something new on the scene, the *ethics* of archaeology. It is not possible at this stage to offer a balanced and objective picture of what has taken place in the last few years, but in lieu of that perhaps a despatch from the front line is better than nothing.

At least four factors have brought us to our present position. The first began with the impact of the natural sciences (and lately the

social sciences) on conventional archaeological thought and method. This, above all, lies behind the revulsion from pure typology as an approach, and less obviously it is responsible for the dramatic rehabilitation of fieldwork. The second factor, which must be linked to the growth of paid archaeological jobs and the sharp rise in the number of active archaeological groups—notably under the influence of extra-mural departments—is the potential threat of a decline in the supply of primary material for progressive study. The third is our belated recognition of the rate at which our most desirable primary material, ecological evidence, is being destroyed, and also of the inability of British archaeology to cope with this destruction. The fourth, which merits a much deeper analysis than I have space or skill to provide, is the 'ethics' part of my title; the categorical imperative to *do* something and the elevation of this attitude to an actual moral duty. This fourth and last factor cannot be separated from a standpoint (familiar enough to readers of the *Guardian*, *New Scientist*, and other periodicals) involving mankind within his environment, a standpoint I shall call 'the genetic conscience syndrome'. We can examine British archaeology today in the light of these four elements, each apparently related to the other three.

First, we have the changing approach at the grass-roots. The progress of archaeological knowledge, unlike that of Greek syntax or Shakespearean studies, depends utterly upon the regular supply of new data. Only this will

allow us to expand, modify, or reject hypotheses, to extend knowledge laterally by laboratory techniques, and to reconstruct partial time-space episodes from the past. Where isolated individual discoveries form our main desiderata, either in the shape of objects or groups of related objects or any kind of construction (building or monument), the simplest way to obtain them is through excavation; or, as a second best, through collecting surface or other non-contextual finds. Our approach to this material must however ultimately be a typological or morphological one, even if we disguise it as being technological or 'artifactual', or expand it by the employment of all modern scientific techniques. As long as this is all we want, we have every reason to be satisfied. But a growing body of workers do not want isolated packets of data, and will not be satisfied at all. The attitude of these students is summed up in the credo that they are digging up neither people nor things, but ecologies.

As archaeologists continue to show their preference for this new attitude—that fresh evidence in whatever form should be sought, seen, and processed as far as possible in ecological bundles—the old pipeline will tend to become inadequate to their needs, discredited as it stands, and (perhaps in a generation or so, if excavation itself be superseded as a method of discovery) redundant. The primary material that everyone wants is, or very shortly will be, the *site*; better still, a finite site complex with the evidence of successive ecological situations below, within, and around it. That we have for all practical purposes reached this stage already will be clear to anyone following the trends apparent in (say) reports of barrow and henge excavations, or in our remarkable progress in studying the prehistory of agriculture. This is not the place to follow Bruce Trigger into the debatable territory of *functions*, relevant though this question is to such a general new approach; but the impressive shift of emphasis from finds to sites (putting it in the simplest way) has necessarily brought the subsidiary discipline of fieldwork into prominence, since by fieldwork we mean basically a systematic search for more sites. The consequent drift from the idea of

excavation for excavation's sake has also been intensified by the inflationary rise in the cost of running large-scale digs, to name but one contributory feature.

But this very increase in our old national pastime of archaeological fieldwork, particularly when carried out at a highly proficient level, organized for specific ends and applied to large areas, has brought its own new worries. Few of us outside the field staff of the Royal Commissions had realized that certain categories of monument, notably in southern Britain, are now nearly extinct because of development, urban expansion, and above all deep ploughing. Where are the field-monuments for tomorrow, on which the bright new ecological investigations should take place? The question is less why this has all happened than why we failed to see, until comparatively recently, that it *had* happened. From another angle entirely, we now appreciate the quantitative errors in past thinking. While few if any countries can boast a map-producing agency up to Ordnance Survey standards, the inclusion of archaeological sites on the various scales of O.S. sheets is subject to very definite rules. Revised sheets cannot always show sites which have been destroyed (but are known beyond doubt to have existed) nor for that matter an enormous range of sites whose presence can only be detected or deduced through the help of advanced techniques. Nor, of course, can they show sites which have not yet been brought to the official notice of the Ordnance Survey. The schemes of area survey in depth, now being carried out as part of this great fieldwork revival—unfortunately most of them in regions least threatened by development—cannot be regarded as more than random samples, but they are fair and valid samples. They now give rise to one clear and inexorable conclusion. Every published distribution map in British archaeology (of more than purely local application) is nothing but an inadequate, probably misleading, interim statement. Of course this is a risk we have always accepted, and we know this. What many of us may not know is that the volume of discoveries is now such that the risk has become, in almost every instance, unacceptable. The gulf between the results of

recent work and the distributions available in print is so great as to vitiate inferences drawn as part of the normal exercise of archaeological thinking and writing. When we extend this fact to the applied aspects of archaeology—land utilization, settlement-history, cultural contact, prehistoric demography—we find a case for halting most of this work until 1980. The one form of aid that might lend some degree of precision to the present uncertainty, the application of all those (admittedly not yet perfect) techniques of area analysis and measurement usually called ‘the new geography’, has hardly been exploited at all. Very few archaeologists have examined, let alone mastered, these difficult and limited exercises; the minority of geographers who have done so have yet to focus their skills upon archaeological material.

If this radical change of emphasis in outlook forms the first factor, something of the law of supply and demand in relation to this change constitutes the second factor. There are now not only more professional archaeological posts in Britain than ever before, but the expected saturation point continues to elude us. We must add the growth of the number of potential excavators, job directors, and hard core volunteers; this growth proceeds as much from university extra-mural departments as from internal degree and diploma courses. All over Britain, small or medium-sized bodies continually emerge from extra-mural classes or from the ranks of disgruntled activists in the old county societies, the phrase ‘Such-and-such Archaeological Research Group’ being the customary title. The debasement of standards in the conduct and reporting of excavations has been inevitable, and the desirable direction of this mass of good-natured talent and effort into proper channels, with valid and realistic aims, appears well-nigh impossible in a country like ours where excavations can take place without any proper licensing system.

What must concern us, as a consequent second factor, is that if this continues unchecked, excavational destruction at greatly varying levels of efficiency and responsibility will be threatening our last dwindling reserves of certain groups of still-intact field monuments;

and this at no very distant point in the future. There is one alternative (apart from rigid licensing control), and it is one that the Council for British Archaeology is determined to pursue; and that is to divert the talent, the energy, the enthusiasm and good-will of tens of thousands of part-time archaeologists into non-destructive fieldwork. It will be no secret to most that the CBA now encourages, through its limited annual grants, and through its sponsored conferences, the prosecution of major fieldwork projects and the acceptance of new ideals about responsibilities. Fieldwork is being promoted in preference to, and possibly as a next step even to the exclusion of, non-rescue excavation. If this is the stick, and it is only a little one, the carrot must also be dangled. Taking advantage of the new fashion for fieldwork, great efforts are being deployed to demonstrate that advances in archaeological knowledge can be effected through fieldwork more rapidly, more economically, and far less destructively than with equivalent amounts of money and time and effort devoted to digging. Such a demonstration is particularly relevant to amateur societies where perhaps 5 per cent of the membership is all that turns up for an excavation, since fieldwork can involve a much larger number of people. This campaign deserves to succeed because its message is manifestly true (if not yet manifestly popular, for digging is more fun than fieldwalking or investigating tithe maps), and as a campaign it can be immediately linked to our third and fourth factors.

The third factor is something that is not, and never could be, widely appreciated on a national scale. Just as the unaided human eye registers but a narrow segment of the scene before it, so the 99 per cent of us who live out our lives in a restricted geographical setting never see for ourselves, and therefore never comprehend, what may be happening over thousands of square miles around us. Few of us in any walk of life and only a bare handful in archaeological circles travel habitually and extensively around Britain and Ireland at other people’s expense; and how many of us ever see large tracts of our land from the air? The soberly measured

reports of the extent of destruction of archaeological monuments—and, deduced from consecutive visits and viewings, the even more alarming *rate* of this wholesale obliteration—have reached us almost too late; almost, if happily not quite. Only within the last two or three years did these warning voices (of the Royal Commissions' staffs, Dr St Joseph, Philip Barker, and a few others) register at last on the national archaeological ear.

When a threat of this magnitude is posed and the decision to respond appropriately is seen to be essential, one looks for the tools equal to the job; as our remote ancestors might have seized their hand-axes at the approach of the snarling *Smilodon*. Alas, the national hand-axe, when finally exhumed from a midden of complacency, proved to be little bigger than a side-scraper. If this present critical emergency in British archaeology has done no more than reveal the popular attitude to our archaeological heritage, together with our pitiful inability to respond to a challenge of such dimensions, it will still have served some useful purpose. It is the private sector of British archaeology, burdened as it is with a great tottering unbalanced mare's nest of hundreds of archaeological societies of all kinds, that may well have to be groomed as the saviour of the British heritage. It is possible—perhaps inevitable—that most of the work will fall upon the younger workers, those who until now would expect to govern all these societies in their middle age. It may be that the whole shambling structure with its unwieldy CBA regional groupings, its plethora of journals good bad and indifferent, and its chronic ailments of complacency and introspection, will collapse under the strain of action. What, then, of our State archaeological agencies, in particular those which form part of the Department of the Environment and are charged with the preservation and recording of all forms of ancient monument or building, within the existing statute law? The plain truth is that, however excellent those of our friends and colleagues who staff these agencies may be, twenty times their numbers could not cope with the present crisis and simultaneously discharge their official routine.

It is against this sombre background that the interesting events of the last two years—the first meeting at Barford, Warwicks., early in 1970, the North British repeat performance at Newcastle, the unprecedented Senate House rally in London last January, the formation of the movement *Rescue* (see p. 249), the CBA's choice of conference topics for 1971, the *rapprochements* between traditionally diverse national archaeological interests to form a kind of united front, the propaganda speeches heard increasingly at archaeological meetings, and the new topics in archaeological journalism—must all now be seen and evaluated. In so far as anyone can talk about 'a national response' to the archaeological crisis, the moment of revelation at Barford and the creation of *Rescue* constitute just this. The response has come from private individuals and from the private sector because British archaeology is, and for some time has been, dominated by archaeologists in this sector (whether truly 'private' or whether from the publicly financed world of universities). Where the nation, through its elected government and permanent Civil Service, can be prodded or shamed or galvanized into any kind of action, the prodding will continue to happen (as it happens now) at levels necessarily higher than those of our grossly undervalued State archaeological agencies. All possible stops are pulled out, all tricks of the trade are employed. The justification for this display of energy, if justification be sought, is that the nation can hardly be expected to divert sufficient funds and resources to counter an emergency, the very existence of which it barely recognizes. Moreover, any decision to act on an appropriate scale would involve national acceptance of a basic premiss. This premiss will be given below, but there is no evidence that it *is* yet accepted nationally.

In this kaleidoscopic situation, the most progressive elements in British archaeology have at last shuffled together under one banner. It is difficult, especially for a present office-bearer, to define the Council for British Archaeology, and the analogy that from time to time flits across my own mind is that of the Methodist Conference. The CBA exists for, through, and with

the continued agreement of, its constituent members (who are all societies, not individuals). It is the recognized channel for Government aid to archaeological work in Britain. Its influence is in proportion to the volume of relevant noise that it makes at any given moment. While the CBA must through its Council and numerous Committees reflect in the broadest way the current opinions of archaeologists in Britain, it would be failing dismally if it were ever to shrink from its duty to initiate, shape, and project new and apposite doctrines. Far from encouraging any kind of closed shop, or from perpetuating the now unreal barrier between what used to be called 'amateur' and 'professional' archaeologists, the CBA needs constantly to enrol more workers, and must make increasing calls upon the time and energy of all those connected with it, regardless of their personal archaeological status. The fact, sometimes ill-informedly criticized, that there exists considerable overlap between the directing elements of the CBA, of *Rescue*, of the various new Motorway Committees, and of all the new liaison bodies that involve archaeologists in other disciplines, should on the contrary be seen as a mark of our general insufficiency. We still do not have enough workers who are both able and willing to *do* something in this emergency, and anyone who offers to carry one bucket will probably find himself perforce carrying a dozen.

The fourth and last factor, the crystallization of what I can only describe as a new *ethic* of archaeological responsibility, is bound to colour all that has been said before. This is a social phenomenon of much interest, quite apart from a certain opportune prominence that it lends to our discipline. Why bother to make all this effort anyhow? The past in Britain, in comparison with that of most other countries, is exceptionally fully and richly mapped. Our museums bulge with objects, provenanced and otherwise. For the pure typologist, there are sufficient bronze daggers to construct sixteen-phase schemes for the Wessex Culture, enough urns and beakers to fill half a dozen Gulbenkian monographs, enough megaliths in the field to re-arrange the higher philately several times

over. The clue must lie partly, but only partly, in the change of approach from finds to sites, from things to ecological contexts, from isolated technological events to Fowler's 'dioramic palimpsests of successive landscapes' (*sic*). Are we, through sloth and negligence, really prepared to deprive all future archaeologists in Britain of their chance to make new and dramatic discoveries in their turn? However we may interpret the aims of archaeology, dare we be confident that our present battery of techniques wrests all the potential evidence from the soil? Will future field archaeologists forgive us if we fail to try to secure for them a modicum of field archaeology? I except here a whole range of similar arguments connected with the sheer visual impact of remains of the past as part of a common European (or even international) heritage, or with the notion of archaeology as an added dimension to those areas presumably to be set aside permanently for leisure and recreation.

It is in such circumstances that one can readily understand how the concept of a duty to preserve at least some part of our visible past, at this present day, for the benefit and enjoyment of the future, could arise and, thanks be, has at last arisen. This is not entirely novel. There have always been those few excavators who, deliberately, refrained from total excavation in order to leave part of some major site for future and hypothetically more proficient examination. What is both new and opportune is that, whereas there have been times past when any such proposition in archaeology might have been dismissed as alarmist, irrelevant, or near crankery on all fours with views about natural foods or the wrongness of vaccination, it now fits entirely into 'the genetic conscience syndrome'. This last is perhaps easier to recognize than to define, some of the diagnostic components being: conservation, pollution of the environment and how to check it, the use of leisure, World Wild Life, anti-racialism, Social Responsibility in Science, agreements on the use of Outer Space, population control, Heritage Coasts, and so on according to personal taste or awareness. Whatever extremes and whatever failures to reckon with delicate

economic consequences the prosecution of individual aspects of this syndrome may be alleged to exhibit, the emergence of all these ideas *en masse* as a form of international intellectual lobby, rapidly acquiring power and teeth, is the most heartening thing in the world today. If I had to isolate the archaeological component in this cluster, and it does exist, I would express it as a premiss: 'That all remains which illuminate any facet of the human past, remains whether visible, tangible, detectable, or recoverable, are valuable in themselves because we can use them to increase the sum of our knowledge of Man in his environment, past and present.' The corresponding *ethical* element, the consciously-expressed duty, that has to be linked to the acceptance of this premiss is that *every generation inherits the duty to examine, to record in advance of destruction, and selectively to preserve, all such remains.*

Unless and until we can sell the very idea of this ethic on a national scale, the general public will continue to believe that archaeologists who wish to halt, curtail, or deflect all forms of development do so for immediate and selfish aims—they wish to keep everything, mainly for the fun of excavating it themselves. The destruction of field monuments and historic buildings, like the indiscriminate search for archaeological objects for profit, is nothing new. Nor have there been lacking in the past individual voices, in local situations, deploring the fact, and even stating in the idiom of their day the outlines of the premiss which is the fourth factor of our present dilemma. But today the destruction is on a scale, and takes place at such a pace, that protest cannot be left to individual voices. The situation overrides, even if not by any means precluding, our parallel debate about the content, aims, methodology, and function of archaeology, a debate made necessary by the rapid changes in archaeology itself. With the national crisis in field archaeology and the historic towns we have a predicament, not of archaeology, but of the archaeologists. It is less of an academic than of a social nature because, willy-nilly, archaeology has become a social problem. Quite apart from the fact that it may help to fulfil human needs we have not

yet wholly defined, like the necessity to provide roots in time and space for communities in raw settings (like the New Towns), and from the sad reality that it can still be distorted in order to support socio-political theories, the peculiar and sometimes irresponsible character of British archaeology has led to another set of confrontations. At a preliminary stage, archaeology can produce conflicts of views over intangible values—the values we place on the visible past as a social or tourist amenity, and the values attached to rural as opposed to urban living. It may lead to direct clashes in a whole range of situations, most of which are commonplace daily problems for the CBA. These include conflicts with subsistence economics (the unfettered use of farm land); with the profit motive and the entire capitalist system (the right to develop land for profit, regardless of content); with the individual's eroded but still partly extant right to do as he wishes with his own property; with situations of national defence; with prevailing aesthetic beliefs (the restoration of ancient monuments or buildings); with other amenity interests (the rights of unrestricted public access to recreation areas); and with the exercise of such profit-inspired hobbies as treasure hunting with cheap electronic detectors. These situations may never trouble the isolated academic or the small local society; but it is only because there have always been a few archaeologists willing to face these problems at regional and national levels that these individuals and groups are still, relatively speaking, free to practise their careers and pastimes in free and favourable conditions.

This essay is, as I warned, no more than a despatch from the firing-line; no more than a battalion commander's hasty summary in the unit's War Diary, scribbled between engagements. These military metaphors are both fair and apt, and the CBA's May 1971 one-day conference on *Public Inquiries; Presenting the Conservation Case*—the first, incidentally, to be opened, and opened with an informed and sympathetic contribution, by a serving Minister of the Crown (Lord Sandford)—was couched in similar terms; the sessions were 'The kinds of battleground', 'Sharpening your weapons', and

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'Advancing into battle'. A Home Guard enthusiasm, but fortunately controlled by a much more sophisticated approach and purpose, pervades the new sense of responsibility. In stressing at this particular conference the *ability* of the ordinary, intelligent, conservation-minded archaeologist to present a case at a public inquiry, Mr Charles Sparrow and Mr David Peace rightly went further, and drew attention to the fact that in most cases the properly-prepared presentation of the case would be the *duty* of the appropriate local fighter. In the wider context of the crisis, many have already responded to the call; Philip Barker, supervising the birth and growth of *Rescue* almost

single-handed, Christopher Musson, translating his philosophy of rescue excavation into practice with his new style Syndicate in North Wales, Brian Philp, with his pioneer New Model Army assuming responsibility for all rescue-work in Kent, and those of our colleagues who shoulder the burdens of motorway rescue schemes on top of existing employment. How many of the universities, traditionally providing the Officer Training Units for future archaeology, are at least making sure that every student of archaeology in Britain is fully aware of the present crisis—let alone channelling excavation effort into rescue-work? How many have decided to close their eyes and ears?

Book Chronicle

We include here books which have been received for review, or books of importance (not received for review) of which we have recently been informed. We welcome information about books, particularly in languages other than English or American, of interest to readers of ANTIQUITY. The listing of a book in this chronicle does not preclude its review in ANTIQUITY.

The ceramics of Altar de Sacrificios by Richard E. W. Adams. *Cambridge, Mass.: The Peabody Museum, 1971. 175 pp., 1 coloured pl., 107 figs., 11 charts in pocket at back of book. \$12.50.*

The European community in later pre-history: studies in honour of C. F. C. Hawkes. Edited by John Boardman, M. A. Brown and T. G. E. Powell. *London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971. 309 pp., 38 pls., 57 figs. £7.00.*

Monographs and papers in Maya archaeology edited by William R. Bullard, Jr. *Cambridge, Mass.: The Peabody Museum, 1970. 512 pp., 107 figs. \$13.50.*

Soldier and civilian in Roman Yorkshire edited by R. M. Butler. *Leicester: University Press, 1971. 208 pp., 9 pls., 28 figs. £4.00.*

Camden's Britannia 1695. *Newton Abbot: David & Charles Reprints, 1971. 1211 pp., many figs. and maps. £25.00.*

The first civilizations: the archaeology of their origins by Glyn Daniel. *Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1971. 208 pp., 78 pls., 16 figs. 40p. First Published by Thames & Hudson 1968.*

The archaeology of the flooded Volta Basin by Oliver Davies. *University of Ghana: Department of Archaeology and the Volta Basin Research Project, 1971. 24 pp., 2 figs. 65p., post free, from the Department of Archaeology, P.O. Box 3, Legon, Ghana.*

L'époque pré-urbaine en Palestine by Pierre R. de Miroshedji. *Paris: J. Gabalda, 1971. 152 pp., 30 figs. Frs.59.*

The place-names of Cheshire by J. Mc.N Dodgson. Part III. *Cambridge: University Press, 1971. 345 pp., £6.00.*

Southern Arabia by Brian Doe. *London: Thames and Hudson, 1971. 267 pp., 142 pls. (8 colour), 41 figs. £4.20.*

Dorset volume III: central. Parts 1 and 2. An inventory of historical monuments in the County of Dorset. *London: Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England), 1970. Part 1: 204 pp., 149 pls. (2 in colour) 3 pull-out diagrams, many figs. Part 2: 260 pp., 67 pls., 6 pull-out diagrams, many figs., 7 maps in pocket at back. £14.00 for both parts.*

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