

“Present and Future of the British Schools, Institutes and Societies Abroad”: A Reply

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When one submits a paper for comment to colleagues it seems normal to expect to meet with some disagreement, or at least very different angles on the subject. Apart from anything else, as Roger Matthews states, these comments are inevitably the result of personal experiences, and these normally vary. I was therefore a little alarmed at the lack of such formal criticism here, and worried that my paper had perhaps been too bland and dull to provoke such a response. The alternative is that we do all see these institutions as the wonderful places Professor Fulford refers to. It is heartening to read such a positive comment from the new chair of BASIS.

My paper was written very much from an archaeological perspective for an archaeological audience. All the comments broaden the debate. Professor Fulford asks a question that might appear most worrying – “how many disciplines in UK higher education (HE) are aware at all of the existence of the overseas Schools, Institutes and Societies?” I can only really answer that in terms of the CBRL experience. We have had, for a long time now, a very multi-disciplinary committee. Apart from the desirability of this for its own sake, it is needed so that our research committee and appointments panels can assess the many non-archaeological (and related disciplines) applications we receive. In my paper I state that I am the only archaeologist amongst six research active CBRL staff. OK, there is also a classicist and someone working on ancient Semitic languages, but the other three are social scientists working on contemporary issues. The lecture at our forthcoming AGM will be on “Syrian Workers in Lebanon: The Politics of the Disciplined Commodity” by Dr John Chalcraft, London School of Economics (LSE), and the lead article in our latest newsletter, by Prof. Clive Holes (University of Oxford) and Said Salman Abu ‘Athera (2005), is on contemporary Bedouin poetry. It is clear that many other disciplines are not only aware of us, but becoming increasingly engaged. Even the Leverhulme-funded project Professor Fulford mentions is a good example of this. Several of the disciplines represented (meteorology, hydrology, geology) are not part of the Academy’s remit, although they do of course further our remit of working for British academe, but others from human geography continue to develop our fields of interest. Our advertisements go out to departments in the following disciplines where they offer courses or have existing research in the Levant: anthropology, Arabic, archaeology, classics, geography, Hebrew, history, Islamic studies, Jewish studies, law, Middle Eastern studies, music (for ethno-musicology), Oriental studies, politics and religious/biblical studies, and also to faculties of arts and humanities and languages (both modern and ancient) where individual departments no longer exist. The answer to Professor Fulford’s question is that many individual researchers from many disciplines are aware of us, but we should certainly not be complacent about this. We are probably not embedded in a corporate disciplinary consciousness in very many disciplines the way

we are in archaeology. One particular issue for the CBRL at present is how to broaden our membership beyond the traditional disciplinary pool.

In a sense, the one response from beyond the world of the Academy and the institutions was even more encouraging. Sarah Finke's comment was very positive about the value of the institutions abroad, especially the role played by those with an overseas base, and how these allow reciprocity between British and host communities. Her statement regarding the key role that culture can play in development and international relations widened this still further than the specific points she raised. We do not operate within a framework of cultural diplomacy, as is typical for example of the French institutes at least in the Near East. While this may mean our budgets are smaller, it gives us a great deal more flexibility and allows us to focus on research rather than, for example, large-scale conservation programmes, where, driven by the needs of cultural diplomacy, some projects work to standards and objectives that would not match practice in the UK. We are in many cases involved in far more sustainable efforts – sustainable because they are small scale – and we have to really work with and foster local passions and interest. A successful project at present is working with the Bedouin in southern Jordan on a Neolithic trail. Collaborating with individuals and families who have worked with archaeologists for many years, we are now trying to develop a low-impact tourist trail that combines their existing hiking tours with their familiarity with the sites. They can earn an income in areas where the big tour buses cannot go. We increase knowledge of a time when Jordan was a vital part of a major human development, and gain community involvement in the long-term maintenance of the sites. The BSAI has of course been working with Iraqi archaeologists, not just since the war, but for a long time, keeping communication going and trying to make sure that the importance of heritage is not forgotten. This role of nurturing relations in a polarised world is of course one of the issues Roger Matthews raised. It is also a role that the BIEA has entered into in South Sudan.

Lane specifically raises the point about trying to assist the development of local scholars and students. It is a difficult balance to maintain, where Academy funds are clearly designed to assist British research, but where local involvement and engagement are essential, academically and ethically. It is interesting to hear Lane's account of this, from a part of the world where we are informed that funds for assisting local scholarship are not readily available, as Britain prefers to spend its money in really poor parts of the world, including much of Africa.

Returning to archaeology, one of the observations the archaeologists make is the influence the RAE has had on encouraging short-term projects, at the expense of longer-term multi-disciplinary field-based research, although this pressure probably pre-dates the RAE and resulted directly from Treasury planning models and reviews affecting all government-sponsored research. In the UK and elsewhere it has probably served to widen the gap between many university archaeologists and the practitioners engaged in the field. I was party to a conversation in a large department recently, where senior members of staff could not think of a suitable candidate with the field experience to run

a training project. Our own foci in Wadi Faynan and Homs have served to provide a long-term strategic framework, and all institutions have similar established plans that continue to be developed in strategic plans. We can only provide the framework, however – a serious commitment is also required from university staff, and a willingness to collaborate with other universities in a manner that is currently under some pressure from the RAE. Fortunately that commitment is there, and collaborative research projects continue to develop.

Reference

Holes, C. and Salman, S. 2005. Ya Kundalizza! Politics and Popular Poetry in Jordan, *CBRL* 2005, 21-25.