

## **Comment on “Present and Future of the British Schools, Institutes and Societies Abroad”**

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What we write is always coloured by personal experience – an unimaginably dull world would otherwise result. Prior to joining the Institute of Archaeology, UCL (IoA), in 2001, I had spent my entire professional archaeological career, since 1986, as a full-time employee of two of the bodies here the subject of discussion, directing the British School of Archaeology in Iraq (BSAI) from 1988 to 1996 and the British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara (BIAA) from 1995 to 2001. My default view of the British institutions abroad is that they are immensely valuable and productive organisations that provide a rich array of services and facilities to the British and international academic communities while at the same time conducting first-rate research in the field, in libraries and in museums, as neatly summarised here in Bill Finlayson’s thorough overview. Perhaps above all, they provide an intellectual focus for British and other scholars to interact at a range of levels with the academic communities of their host countries, and thus to generate, facilitate and execute truly international and trans-disciplinary projects that have a major impact in the world of archaeology and beyond. In what, according to our daily media, appears to be an increasingly polarised world, the role of the British institutions abroad in nurturing academic relations between British and host-country scholars, even or especially in circumstances where a physical presence in that host country is not currently possible (e.g. Iraq), is of incalculable value.

In a recent short article Richard Hodges (2005) underlines the dramatic decline in field-based research within the context of British university departments of archaeology. He underscores the impact of Research Assessment Exercise (RAE)-driven pressure to publish pieces of research rooted in the short-term activities of the individual researcher rather than those of collaborative teams with long-term objectives. In this environment the aims and objectives of fieldwork can be viewed as too remote and diffuse to have useful input into departments’ RAE profiles:

The result is an extraordinary situation – now commonplace across Europe – where only a few university academics excavate and so their students have little or no experience of research-led investigations.

(Hodges 2005: 8)

Writing as someone who has not excavated since becoming a British university academic four years ago, I wholeheartedly concur with Hodges’ view here. We need to find space within our departments for the fostering and maintaining of commitments to trans-disciplinary projects that incorporate ambitious visions and intellectual outcomes that transcend the immediate and the individual. Our European colleagues have been

less short-termist and individualist hitherto – it is difficult to think of British-based projects, at least in western Asia, that match the long-term engagement and commitment of archaeological endeavours such as excavations at Hattusa, Arslantepe, Sheikh Hamad, and a host of other projects, especially German and Italian, whose research designs are structured in terms of decades rather than seasons. The only convincing British candidate in this league is the 25-year project at Çatalhöyük in Turkey, whose director, Ian Hodder, is no longer based at a British university.

What needs stressing in this context is the real and potential role of the British institutions abroad in facilitating and supporting such long-term approaches to complex and compound research issues that demand multiple seasons of fieldwork, post-excavation processing and analysis, and a coherent programme of interim and final publication. The British institutions abroad are uniquely well-placed to assist in all these regards, and have indeed fulfilled this role supremely for much of their existence already. In the context of Hodges' point, however, it could be said that now more than ever there is scope, and an urgent need, for British universities to engage with British institutions abroad in planning and executing such programmes for the benefit of all.

Bill Finlayson rightly points to the role of the institutions in publishing the results of relevant research, whether or not conducted under their auspices, in highly-regarded journals and monographs. The institutions abroad have a tremendous track record in this regard but one could argue that more could be done to push previous fieldwork through to a finally published state. There are still too many projects from the 1950s-1980s that have not received adequate publication, and again the British institutions abroad should be in a strong position to address this shortcoming, as described by Bill for the Council for British Research in the Levant (CBRL)'s Tel Jezreel project.

The optimum future of the British institutions abroad will be closely bound up with that of British university departments (and not solely archaeology departments, as Bill makes clear). In my own case, the teaching of a course on the archaeology of Anatolia is, I feel, a good example of how a British university and an institution abroad, in this case the British Institute at Ankara (BIAA), can collaborate with benefits for all parties (UCL 2005). This course for UCL undergraduates takes place in Turkey each summer and gives students a well-structured experience of the archaeology of another country, with a mix of taught sessions and visits to relevant sites and museums around Turkey, where invited specialist speakers give further sessions. The course is physically hosted on the premises of the BIAA, whose excellent accommodation, administrative and library facilities are at the disposal of the course participants (who become members of the BIAA). Supported by fieldwork funds from UCL, the students not only learn a great deal about the archaeology of ancient Turkey but also gain valuable insights into many aspects of modern life in a very different country. These are the individual building blocks in the bridge of international understanding. It is an education in the best sense, for the teacher as much as for the students, and I only wish all my western Asia courses could be conducted in the same manner. There are countless other ways in which these two spheres of academic enquiry – British university departments and

British institutions abroad – may, like a double star, reach a mutually satisfying and stable partnership in a space that allows each to follow their own orbits while sharing a common trajectory towards often long-term and complex goals.

### **References**

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