

**Theoretical Archaeology Group (TAG): Sixteenth Annual Conference,
University of Bradford, December 14th - 16th 1994**

R. Robin Dods

Institute of Archaeology, UCL and Okanagan University College, Canada

I went to TAG as someone new to the archaeological community of Great Britain. The received wisdom concerning - how to put it diplomatically? - the 'dog fights' that ensued as a general course at TAG meetings left me with some trepidation about the conference and my slight role in it. However, the contentious atmosphere did not seem to materialise. Offered here is a brief overview of some of the many papers presented this year. Their selection is purely at the whim of my choice of sessions and does not reflect the actual depth and breadth of this conference.

Once you ignored the cute slides, the truly interesting paper of the session on 'Artefacts in archaeology: beyond provenance and dating', was 'Why Aristotle and Mendeleev were very clever indeed but bonkers!: resources, artefacts and the nature of perception'. In this paper Doonan discussed 'intentionality' with respect to the arsenic content of copper bronzes and the domains of perception in operation at various times (i.e., time of the artefacts' manufacture; time of analysis by the archaeologists) within the context of the values that humans impart to materials as well as artefacts. A wide-ranging and deep paper on the cultural construct of cognitive categories, the general conclusion was that questions on and about materials need restating. The antithesis of this paper was the one presented by Leswick, 'The material form and cultural construction'. Arguing that nothing exists until it is observed, the person of the past lacks existence until their artefacts (here pottery) are observed. Thus Schrodinger's cat finds another life. Egocentric by definition, such research can only widen the debate on the nature of the analysis of the 'other'. The reuse of the concept of 'mental templates' without any obvious awareness of its origin was irritating when juxtaposed with a diatribe on anthropological archaeology (aka American archaeology). In the context of a meeting where people in general seemed to be attempting to incorporate anthropological interpretations of archaeological data and to make very noble attempts to insert people into the picture of the past as developed by a 'pure' school of scientific archaeology, this paper seemed discordant.

'Ceramics, theory and the rumblings from the potshed' (Blinkhorn), 'Much ado about dinner; the social context of eating and drinking in Roman Britain' (Meadows), and 'Making culture material: ceramic technology as cultural identity' (Sillar) were interesting papers attempting to place ceramics as social indicators within various contexts. For the most part the authors succeeded but Blinkhorn's political arguments could have been deepened into a truly profound analysis of current issues in archaeological practice in the context of government regulation tied to private (corporate) funding.

In the session 'Digging up people: biological anthropology and the archaeologist' the real challenge was found in the paper presented by Mays, 'Infanticide and its recognition in the archaeological record'. Although interesting, it was devoid of political awareness and extremely ethnocentric with 'western' set in opposition to 'non-western' society, a distinction made directly two if not three times in the course of a paper that emphasised the 'otherness' of infanticide. Mays stated that the practice of infanticide has

decreased in non-western societies because of the availability of abortion. His view of the resources that women can access is rather simplistic. Any discussion of infanticide must include some reference to the practices and policies within and between cultures where children are eliminated for various reasons of custom and/or economics. However, in the use of models based on the lives of modern 'non-western' peoples Mays missed, even *en passant*, the political content that must be an intrinsic part of such an analysis. Certainly in a discipline such as ours where insights from the past can offer observations for today and *vice versa*, archaeology is placed in a unique political position which should be more widely acknowledged.

The other papers of this session were disappointing. They included a 'there I am on site' slide show, as well as a presentation by the microphone-shy Boocock in a room with dead air. Further, the use of sentence-by-sentence overheads by Wiggins confirmed that one time through a slim paper was more than sufficient. There were the standard textbook warnings on recovery problems, although charmingly presented. Much comment was made on the place of biological archaeology or human osteology in the Old World as opposed to the New World, which is perceived as the model for this type of research (Pinter-Bellows, 'Digging up cemeteries in theory and practice', and Anderson, 'The on-site osteoarchaeologist'). In general they were a good discussion of problems and processes. And bravo Anderson! He speaks of the 'person' not the 'specimen', which must be conducive to the immediate placement of the individual within his or her social milieu - always an appropriate place to begin and end in any endeavour dedicated to an understanding of humans.

The 'Production of prehistory: convention and invention' session organised by a contingent from the Department of Anthropology, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, attempted to provide a view described as being generated from outside, the outside being the other side of the Atlantic. The papers were stimulating. Of particular note was Dell's discussion of the political nature of the construction of 'the past' within the context of a national ideology ('The Dane's Cast and Black Pig's Dyke: politics, nation building and archaeology in Ireland, 1894-1994'). Although Dell did mention his Irish ancestry, he does not state his political stance in this analysis. And since the migration of many Irish to North America (in coffin ships in the nineteenth century) was so driven by political and associated economic factors, a statement of the position from which one is undertaking such an analysis is not out of place. The Irish theme continued in 'The creation of the past through nineteenth century Irish Ordnance Survey maps' by Smith, in which she presented a challenging look at the Irish countryside. The striking feature was her attempt to link this to social history. However, she failed to make a broader link to the concept of the 'empty landscape' that was used to such political effectiveness by colonising and colonial powers in the Americas and Southern Africa.

Roveland's 'Contextualising the history and practice of Hamburgian archaeology at the German site of Pennworthmoor', and Whitney's 'The forest and hunter: contemporary images, postglacial reconstructions' both attempted to define and explain meanings evoked in the practice of archaeology. Reflexivity and critical analysis of meanings emphasised that they had read their Hodder. "'Man emerging from savagery": prehistory in the British Museum' (by Mullins but read by Dell) dealt with similar themes, and although the paper was challenged a fruitful discussion was impossible since the author was absent. Coming from a different perspective was the paper 'Constructing ancestors: archaeological and folkloric interpretations in ancient landscapes' by Gazin-

Swartz. Focusing on Scottish materials, the paper was an exercise in the emic and etic perceptions of time and space (or fairytime and fairyspace). In an area that requires more research she relied on printed reports of folklore rather than direct ethnographic fieldwork. But in an age of TV and video games, and indeed even books, she may have a long search for bearers of the old wisdom on the meaning of time and space.

A highlight for me was the paper, added at the last minute, 'Imaging and imagining primitiveness: nineteenth century depictions of the Neanderthal skull' (Reybrouck), on the use of the *camera lucida* in the production of the first visual presentation of Neanderthal skulls. An excellent illustration of the development and perpetuation of the image of the primitive, this paper was a very cogent demonstration of perception on both a practical and a philosophical level and truly summed up issues as presented in the other papers of this session. I do not think this was planned but sometimes serendipity can produce the most remarkable results.

By now it was Friday morning and I was a little jittery as my own denouement awaited in the afternoon session 'Theory and model building in environmental archaeology'. I drifted in for a peek at one session where Preziosi's paper 'Museology as ideological practice' was being read for him. And a gallant effort it was too: the paper was so densely complicated, with layered abstractions and invented terms that I can only think it had content. Of course what I need is a copy of it so I can read it for myself, because that is what it needs - a read not a listen.

I enjoyed it all, but my one regret was that I arrived late for the opening address by Bruce Trigger from McGill University in Montreal, Canada, and caught only his final points. Kudos to the organisers. All appeared to run smoothly and like all theatre it is always how it looks from out front, regardless of any chaos backstage. Thanks to all of you.