

European Association of Archaeologists Conference, University of Bournemouth, 14th - 19th September, 1999

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After having spent several days and nights in mid-September surrounded by archaeologists of all descriptions and nationalities in a windswept Bournemouth, I feel driven to account for this stretch of time before my memories become, like archaeology, a little vague and prone to contradiction ...

The conference had a number of parallel sessions within the 'out of town' campus, concentrated around the School of Conservation Sciences. Having made arrangements to meet a great many friends and colleagues over the five days I was in Bournemouth, the following remarks concern only the sessions I was able to attend.

Quite different from most of the other sessions and certainly thought-provoking was the session called 'Archaeological Sensibilities'. The aims of the session were to explore and visualise, on the one hand, the subjectiveness embedded in archaeological artefacts and story-telling and on the other, the ways in which personal experiences of memories and emotions are related and often implicit in the same. Elisabeth Beausang, a Ph.D. student from the University of Göteborg, initiated the idea for the session and organised it together with two colleagues, Fiona Campbell and Jonna Hansson, both fellow Ph.D. students from the same university.

First out was Jonna Hansson who, using a video of her childhood during the 1960's, presented a paper called 'Excavating Silence'. In this paper she discussed the past and the present, dislocation and memory in the context of an excavation she did on a small cottage belonging to her great-grandmother in the middle of Sweden.

Fiona Campbell continued with her paper 'Traces Re-membered'. She started by drawing a white labyrinth on a black piece of material laid out on the floor. She then explored the labyrinth subjectively and discussed the 'materiality' and 'immateriality' in terms of her experiences of the labyrinth. Fiona argues that archaeological remains, just like the chalk lines, are not fixed; they should be seen as part of an on-going process, states of arrested movement, consisting of presence as well as absence. The remains have become what remains in some moment in between the before and after.

Mike Pearson, Lecturer in Performance Studies at the University of Wales discussed his 'theatre/archaeology' project. He took a step beyond the 'lecturer as interpreter' and, through a multi-media slide show, took the audience for a walk in the landscape of Mynydd Bach.

Elisabeth Beausang looked at why we should attempt to use some of our other senses, apart from the visual, in our interpretation of artefacts, and why our experiences should also play a part in this process, offering the concept of our own

personal archaeologies. Elisabeth argued that material remains do not present us with experience of the past itself and that perhaps by leaving out sensations such as smell, taste, touch and hearing we fail to give a complete interpretation to archaeological remains. The paper was influenced by an incident described by Simone de Beauvoir. The story took place in a bar where de Beauvoir, Sartre and a friend are sipping apricot cocktails, suddenly the friend made a remark to Sartre which obviously shocked him an intriguing story which I hope you will hear from Elisabeth herself one day.

A more archaeological case study was provided by Francis Grew, Curator of Archaeology at the Museum of London, who looked at our interpretations of Roman burial practices and showed how we may be interpreting the familiar objects sympathetically but highly subjectively (coloured by our own personal experiences), while ignoring the more difficult aspects which are much less easily understood such as grave goods, food offerings and sacrificed animals. Francis argued that we should perhaps regard archaeology more as a 'humanity' rather than a pure 'science' and use our own beliefs and experiences to take a more human approach towards such finds.

Dr. Christine Finn from the University of Oxford, looked at some ways in which artefacts are seen by those outside the discipline of archaeology as, for example, providing inspiration for poets and artists. Christine used photographs of 'bog bodies' and read poems inspired by these bodies from the Irish Poet, Seamus Heaney. It was an important paper as it discussed an area which is involved in making archaeology accessible and bridging the gap between public and professional gaze.

The session was concluded by an invitation to a Tea Party by the performance artist, Mark Storer. Tables with linen tablecloths and Mark's best china were laid out and, over tea, we were told a highly visual and evocative story that he heard from his grandmother.

The session on the 'Archaeology of Shamanism' was also very interesting and full of contrasts. Shamanism, as an area of study, has had a raised profile in recent years because of its links with rock art and 'entoptics'. Although the art context was covered fully in this session, some other areas of interest were also discussed in an attempt to 'get to the heart of the archaeology of the mind'.

'Acoustics and the experience of megalithic monuments' were discussed in some detail by Aaron Watson from the University of Reading, though regrettably without audio examples, which would have been useful for a paper on acoustics. Considerable work has been done in this area and Aaron covered most though not all of the approaches available.

Inevitably, it was the art that was the main attraction of this session. Just to remind us that France and Spain are not the only sources of Palaeolithic art in Europe, Martin Porr, from the University of Southampton, presented compelling shamanic interpretations of Aurignacian mobiliary art from southwest Germany. Martin

suggested that we should develop a framework to integrate artistic objects in the social processes of their respective societies and not simply take an essentialist, western art-historical stance when looking at the place of art in Palaeolithic societies.

A contrasting view was proposed by Robert Layton from the University of Durham. Robert discussed a number of parallels between totemism and shamanism with regard to their use as models for explaining rock art. He suggested that palaeolithic portable art is an 'art of everyday life', but that cave art of animals is probably of a more shamanic nature.

The highlight of the session was the paper on San (Bushmen) shamans and southern African rock art by David Lewis-Williams, from the Rock Art Research Centre in Johannesburg, who started the current trend in the study of shamanism. David proposed three 'trajectories' in our understanding of San art - a cosmological framework, a social matrix and a trajectory of particular groups. David showed a slide of an exquisite Eland head painted deep within a cave almost inaccessibly high in the Drakensberg mountains. This prompted a later debate about the nature of religion, belief and the archaeology of mind.

Later, Robert Wallis, again from the University of Southampton, discussed these topics in relation to issues of shamanism, mortuary practices and their interactions. He also discussed the increasingly high profile role of 'neo-shamans' who are claiming the same access rights as native North Americans.

The links that have been made by archaeologists and others between shamanism and mind altering experiences have inevitably attracted some 'bad press' and undesirable attention from both the 'alternative' and orthodox archaeologists. Nevertheless, this session was distinguished by the well balanced presentation of rigorously researched material that only a few years ago would not have been found at such a prestigious venue.

The round table on 'Aerial Archaeology in Europe' was introduced by Bob Bewley of English Heritage. He proposed that a much greater level of access to aerial photographic archives should be a priority of the EAA, and perhaps English Heritage, in the near future. Bob pointed out that in Britain aerial survey is in danger of becoming a victim of its own success, so much so that some believe it is a luxury that we can no longer afford. It is quite ironic that such a view should prevail just as landscape archaeology is emerging from a period of theorising and starting to place so many demands on our understanding of the landscape to which aerial photography can greatly contribute. Other speakers pointed out how difficult access to aerial survey data was elsewhere in Europe, especially in eastern European countries.

Dr. Margaret Cox, fresh from her TV appearances with the 'Time Team' in York, presented a session on 'Ethics and the excavation and treatment of human remains' from a European perspective. Margaret called for a discussion on a Pan-European policy on ethics in this respect, opening the debate as to whether this was a necessary step or whether we should be satisfied with the Vermillion Accord, a World Archaeological Congress position statement agreed to by the delegates at a meeting

held in 1989 in Vermillion, USA on 'Archaeological Ethics and the Treatment of the Dead'. The argument went along the lines that such a Pan-European policy may well be impossible and Britain, with fewer successor communities of indigenous peoples than most of the rest of Europe, would need one of its own, as has happened in Scotland.

Dr. Nicholas Petrov from St. Petersburg University looked at the functioning of funeral sites in the context of modern local religious traditions in north-west Russia, when continual recognition of the barrow/grave is in force, and the places are regarded as spiritual or holy. He discussed how we must always try to give attention to local rituals in our excavation work on such sites.

Pat Excell from the University of York developed the initial argument for a policy for the excavation and treatment of human remains in Britain, raising the question of whether such a policy is really necessary to address these issues, or if a simple set of guidelines would be sufficient.

Jackie Tindill from the University of Queensland took an insightful look into how Western science regards human remains in terms of their scientific potential, disregarding all else, and how this attitude conflicts greatly with the sensibilities of repatriation and reburial considerations. Ethics is a subject debated over long and hard during such cases and often without the presence of an ethicist. Jackie had a point when she said that most people assume they know what ethics are but, if pressed on the subject, readily admit that they do not. An ethicist would be therefore essential when debating these issues.

Hedley Swain from the Museum of London took the exhibition 'London Bodies', an exhibition using skeletons to tell the story of the changing appearance of Londoners through time, as a case study in the consideration of ethics. This gave the curators an opportunity to review their own and the public's attitudes to the display of human remains, the latter being carried out by an analysis of a visitor questionnaire. I remember the exhibition to be both informative and respectful to the exhibits; no school parties were allowed and, apparently, not one complaint was received from the public. I must say that, although the exhibition itself was dignified, the publicity and the press conference was a complete contrast - the press being taken down into the dimly lit basement by torchlight (for effect) where they dined on bone shaped sandwiches and crushed strawberry 'gore'. The subsequent advertising was just as 'subtle'. It was suggested that visitors should have been asked where they saw the exhibition advertised; this would help the museum decide whether such marketing tactics are really necessary in the future.

The World Wide Web is now just beginning to be exploited by the world of archaeological publishing and the session on 'Publishing archaeology in the new millennium' looked at the issues involved concerning the readers, publishers and the companies involved, both commercial and academic, of this new digital medium.

Judith Winters from the publication 'Internet Archaeology' at the University of York discussed how well suited the WWW is to the presentation of archaeology through

hyper links and multi-media and described some of the challenges ahead, not least of which is finding a successful funding model with a strict academic framework.

Jeremy Ottevanger introduced the publications 'Mediterranean Pre-history on-line' and an on-line 'museum' on the early pre-history of the Mediterranean basin, both projects being funded by the EEC TMR project. Again, multi-media offered much more scope for communication than traditional paper-based methods.

Elisabeth Trinkl from Forum Archaeologie, Austria, presented her electronic journal, which has been on-line since 1996. This is a successful private venture and has an established readership. Elisabeth stated that, even though publishing costs over the WWW were very low, long term funding is still necessary to guarantee the future existence, quality and independence of the publication.

Birgit Rasmussen from the University of Aarhus discussed the work involved in placing some 20000 abstracted books of the Nordic Archaeological Abstracts (NAA) on-line, while Irina Oberlander from CIMEC, in Bucharest, contrasted the work in Western Europe with that in Romania. CIMEC is pioneering web-based archaeological publications in a country where access to the internet is rare, and Irina presented a positive view of a future of slow but considerable change. Silvia Costantini from Abaco-mac in Italy, the company involved in the organisation of EAA '97 in Ravenna, took us through the transition of the company from traditional to digital media. Abaco-mac is a private company, and its priorities were somewhat different from those publications based in academic institutions or receiving EEC funding.

The author presented a paper looking at how we improve the relationships between the authors, designers and technical staff when working in digital multi-media and how the whole process from the concept design through to production on-line can be streamlined. This is particularly important when information needs to be updated on a regular (daily/weekly) basis. The session ended with a long and animated discussion on a subject that concerned the whole audience, funding and subscriptions.

The 12 papers presented at the session on 'Visualisation and Digital Imaging in Archaeology' are somewhat a blur as the author and the session organiser are one and same. There were, however, sufficient high points to offer a short review.

Adam Mindykowski from the University of York addressed subjectivity in the computer reconstruction of archaeology. He discussed how computer visualisation made archaeological data easier to comprehend, was generally more cost effective than more traditional methods and allowed for a wider dissemination of the information. However, he also pointed out that great care should be taken in the visual interpretations given in these models.

Vangelis Christodoulo from the Foundation of the Hellenic World (FHW) in Athens and Matthias Unbescheiden from the Fraunhofer Institute for Computer Graphics took our breath away with their Virtual Reality interactive re-constructions of the

ancient city of Miletus and the exploration of a cave at Dunhuang, China, by torch-light.

The author presented a paper which showed some live examples of low-cost, desktop Virtual Reality combined with multi-media for the display of digital objects, artefacts and places in museums and Heritage Centres. An emphasis was placed on using computer visualisation where traditional methods were impossible or not cost effective, and for putting 'inconsequential' objects into a context of time and place to form components which together, told a 'story'. It is also important to allow for a two-way interaction between viewer and object, with their perceptions of the object being recorded and able to be viewed by others.

Brian Larkman from the University of Teesside discussed his work on the theme of 'Space and Place' and the digital modelling of rock art in landscapes, and Mikhail Zhukovsky from Moscow State University enthralled us all with his work on digitally mapping the archaeology of the Alans at Kiator, in the Caucasus mountains, whilst under gun-fire!

The session was concluded by a presentation by Franco Niccolucci from the University of Florence on 'ARTHUR' (Archaeological Reconstruction Tools for Heritage User-access and Research). This is an important European project to develop modelling tools for developers and standards for the Virtual Reality modelling of archaeology. Overall, this was a very successful and enjoyable conference despite the wind and torrential rain - ideal surfing weather, so I'm told.

It was over a chance midnight meeting back at the hotel with a founding member and former President of the EAA, Kristian Kristianson, that I found myself discussing his philosophy for the Association. "The EAA is for all those involved in archaeology: practitioners, academics, researchers and students, young members are particularly encouraged to become involved in the association and contribute to the sessions, the perspective is European. From the beginning, one of the most important aspects of all conferences were the social events, the annual dinner and party are essential to the success of the conference". A later discussion with Willem Williams, the current President of the EAA, at the Annual Party, confirmed that the open and democratic atmosphere of the conference would be encouraged. The sixth annual Conference of the EAA will be in Lisbon in during September 2000.