

Trench Warfare? Archaeologists Battle it Out

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This article was originally commissioned by a leading national newspaper, but on completion was felt to be insufficiently 'controversial' by the paper's editorial staff, and was not published. This actually adds an interesting aspect to the story. As the article became more about the problems inherent in the representation of archaeology by the media, the less interested the newspaper became in actually publishing the story. The reader may make his or her own mind up about whether they would have been happy to read this over breakfast, or if they would have preferred dramatised tales of torrid affairs or malpractice behind the scenes at *Time Team*. I for one found it impossible to reconcile the need to represent all sides of the debate fairly, while under pressure to produce something 'newsworthy'. Any feedback on whether this was a success or failure would be more than welcome.

Channel 4's *Time Team* continues to draw audiences of up to 3 million, seven years after its inception. Many professional archaeologists feel unhappy about the subject being presented in this way. However, archaeologist James Mower argues that *Time Team* has an important message for the discipline.

Archaeology has had a stormy relationship with the media. Typically, it is depicted either as a subject involving adventures across the globe, as for instance in the well-known *Indiana Jones* films, or as the purview of bearded eccentricity in countless documentaries. The subject has, however, been given a new lease of life in recent years on Sunday evenings in the form of *Time Team*, Channel 4's archaeological success story. Part documentary, part *Challenge Anneka*, *Time Team*'s premise is the investigation of an archaeological site in just three days, seeking answers to its mysteries. The hyperactive Tony Robinson, representing the informed layman, helps this along by asking questions designed to get the most out of the experts.

Time Team has proved enormously popular with the viewing public, and the associated *Time Team Club* now has 20,000 members, after only eighteen months in existence. Never before has archaeology been presented to the public in such an accessible and popular manner. Despite being a hit with the general public, there are those within archaeology unhappy with the presentation of their discipline as entertainment. Much of this criticism focuses on the self-imposed time limit of three days.

With such an important element of its appeal based on 'archaeology against the clock', it is hard to see how this format could be changed. With an element of tension in the air *Time Team* emphasizes certain techniques associated with recovering archaeological material through excavation, avoiding footage from the laboratory, in contrast to BBC2's *Meet the Ancestors*, with its emphasis on reconstruction.

"Producers at Channel 4 are trying to make a television programme. The fact that archaeology is involved is neither here nor there. Good TV comes first. The realities

of excavation and recording are not sufficiently considered” argues Peter Bellamy, a freelance archaeologist who has worked as an excavation report writer for *Time Team*. Any archaeologist could tell you that the process of investigating a site is often a lengthy one, with careful recording, drawing and photography of the process undertaken along the way, but *Time Team* rarely presents the minutiae of archaeology to the viewing public. Perhaps this would not be considered ‘good TV’. Should the experts be concerned that archaeological realities may be sacrificed for a good story?

A number of professionals *are* concerned, with criticism of *Time Team* focusing on the idea that a full scientific investigation could be achieved in three days. “Archaeology is an experiment that can only be carried out once,” says historian and documentary maker Michael Wood, “it is important to realize that excavation is a destructive process, carried out on a finite resource”. Carenza Lewis, archaeologist and one of the presenters on *Time Team*, feels that criticism of the three day policy may be missing the point. “Those who complain about timescales on the programme are possibly not aware of the constraints placed on excavation. Fieldwork can often be subject to this sort of restriction but there are those who will always have a problem with *Time Team* as they are not aware of the nature of television work.” *Time Team*’s remit appears to be one that focuses on communicating the excitement of discovery. Archaeology is shown as a field-based exercise. The final resting place of recovered artifacts and the relevance of the work are rarely explained. Interestingly enough, Mick Aston’s key text on *Interpreting the Landscape* (Batsford 1993) could be read as a ‘do-it-yourself’ manual for an episode of the programme. This emphasis on the results of digging rather than interpretation is seen by some professional archaeologists as missing out a vital part of the discipline, “For me archaeology is a way of reasoning about the past, as well as a physical method of investigating it” says Richard Reece, an expert in Roman archaeology, who has appeared on *Time Team*. “Although I find it generally unobjectionable, in the programme I would say there is virtually nothing of real archaeology as I define it. It is entertainment based on archaeology.”

Time Team could be accused of failing to make the point that archaeology is important beyond simply ‘finding things’. The practice of archaeology can be an ambiguous process – from the techniques selected to the conclusions reached. Ironically, this can be a compelling reason for studying the subject, yet the ambiguities on television, more often than not, get left on the cutting room floor in favour of presenting the public with ‘facts’. It is the exploration of an ambiguous past that can help inform archaeologists about the present. Producer Tim Taylor and his colleagues cannot possibly be expected to cover all aspects of such a wide-ranging subject in a single television programme, nor is it likely that such a successful format would be subject to change.

It is important to recognize that Tony Robinson and his colleagues have undoubtedly raised the profile and public perception of archaeology. However, some scholars are unhappy with the profession being ‘watered down’ for popular consumption. Many would even prefer that the political and social ramifications of archaeology be emphasised. One only has to consider the recent controversy over ‘Seahenge’ in Norfolk to realize that differences of opinion about the past can lead to conflict and

public debate. In this instance the removal of a Bronze Age timber circle by archaeologists lead to accusations of religious desecration from modern-day Pagans. Stephanie Moser, lecturer in the Representation of Archaeology at Southampton University, argues that *Time Team* should give airtime to these aspects of the subject. "Archaeology is a political and social enterprise. This is always avoided on the programme. Time Team displays no sense of responsibility about the way the discipline is perceived. Its presenters are created as stereotypes and this has serious implications for the characterization of the profession". Although an increase in the popularity of archaeology as a university course has been partly attributed to *Time Team's* success, Dr. Moser believes that the programme's depiction of archaeologists could have negative ramifications in education and may be misleading for students. "Young people can often choose professions based on the way a discipline is characterized by the media. This may do more harm than good for the profession". Although Mick Aston's famous striped jumper or Phil Harding's love of good beer are elements of the real people, Dr Moser considers that they are exaggerated, creating "...a subtle construct of the profession with stereotypes supposedly representing all archaeologists". However, the image of an archaeologist presented by *Time Team* does at least represent a move away from previous incarnations such as the pipe-smoking academic or the hardened treasure-hunter. This may be just the tonic the discipline needs.

If some academics are unhappy with *Time Team*, the public would clearly disagree. Presenters have their own fan websites, and membership of the *Time Team Club* now includes all ages, from unborn children to 90 year olds. It is difficult not to be impressed by such broad appeal when academic organizations, like the Council for British Archaeology - with only 6000 members - do not seem to be keeping up. The increased awareness of archaeology is seen as a positive aspect of *Time Team's* success. Supporters would argue that the discipline should regard the high profile afforded to the subject as an opportunity for communicating more extensively with an interested public. Gustav Milne, lecturer in Maritime Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, argues that academia shouldn't tie itself in knots over purity in presentation: "...the programme fits a particular niche, if you want to be entertained by archaeology watch *Time Team*, if you want to be informed about it, watch *Chronicle*. *Time Team* has done a lot for archaeology in terms of making it a watchable subject".

Part of this accessibility is down to the dedication of at least one show per series to a 'back garden' excavation, taking place on property belonging to someone who has written in to the programme. Archaeology at such a personal level could be seen as a successful way of communicating archaeology to the public and making it clear that the past is all around us. With current legislation putting the onus on developers rather than central government in the funding of rescue archaeology, it would appear more important than ever that the public are aware of the significance of what may lie beneath the chrysanthemums.

From academia's point of view *Time Team's* real success is to have produced a dedicated audience informed about archaeological techniques. Channel 4 have produced a series of 'site reports' aimed at the non-expert, and cover basic methods

and techniques in the *Time Team Club* magazine – *Trench One*. Here, editor and archaeologist Matthew Reynolds runs articles such as ‘Geophysics on *Time Team*’ - discussing this technique in detail, and ‘Conservation in depth’ – concerned with looking after artefacts once they have been recovered. *Videotext*, the makers of the programme, have recognized that an informed public presents an opportunity to go into greater detail. Along with educational drives, such as *Trench One*, and a website, the production team are currently planning a new series covering archaeology, not in three days, but from the planning stages to post-excavation.

The success of archaeology in its television form speaks volumes about the untapped public interest in the subject that academia has never been able to harness. That the public can be given a sense of community through an interaction with their shared heritage is a message of vital importance from *Time Team* to the modern academic discipline. Consider this extract from a letter to *Trench One* – “I have always been interested in the past and *Time Team* has made me want to become an active archaeologist. Although I am a busy working mum... last week I attended my first dig!”.

With funding for excavation and research often difficult to obtain, many archaeologists welcome new ways of raising the profile of the profession. Tim Schadla-Hall, lecturer in Public Archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, says academia has much to learn from Mick Aston and his colleagues: “It is easy to complain about this sort of television archaeology, but academia should be capitalizing on the success of *Time Team*. They have taken an important step towards a greater public awareness of what we actually do”. Carenza Lewis wholly agrees, “More than any other archaeology programme that has ever been commissioned, *Time Team* involves the public, and they are rivetted by the process and magic of discovery.”

Perhaps *Time Team* ought to cover more of the debate within archaeology. Perhaps they should show us the process of recording a site and, more importantly, why this is done. But would the public *really* want to see archaeologists working in the pouring rain, up to their knees in mud? This is showbusiness folks. Whoever said that reality was entertaining?

The Time Team website can be found at <http://www.channel4.com/nextstep/timeteam/>

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