
REVIEW

Society of Archaeological Masters Students Annual Conference V

Nicole Barber

The Society of Archaeological Masters Students Conference is an opportunity for UCL Institute of Archaeology masters students to present their research. This year's conference included papers from MA Cultural Heritage Studies, MSc Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology, MSc Archaeological Science: Technology and Materials, and MSc Palaeoanthropology and Palaeolithic Archaeology students. The event sparked discussion between students from all areas of the department, and showcased the impressive range of research currently undertaken at the Institute of Archaeology.

Keywords: Conference review; Research design; Forensic investigation; Cultural heritage; Archaeometallurgy; Fossil hominins; Cognition

26th May 2017 saw the fifth Society of Archaeological Masters Students (SAMS) Annual Conference. This annual conference aims to create a platform for masters students at the UCL Institute of Archaeology to showcase their research, and provide an opportunity to gain presentation experience. This year's conference encompassed cultural heritage, forensic anthropology, and Palaeolithic archaeology amongst other areas, although a common thread of methodological critique and a focus on research design ran through the day. Keynote speaker Sherry Nakhaeizadeh, a PhD candidate at the UCL Centre for the Forensic Sciences, began the conference proceedings with her research into the effects of cognitive bias in forensic anthropology. Her discussion

of method development in forensic science, and particularly minimising the use of subjective methods, set the tone for many of the talks to follow, and admirably embodied this year's conference theme of 'Archaeology: changing methods and themes'.

The first session began with a paper by Marie Kvalcova, the first of a number of MSc Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology students to present work focusing on the importance of tailored and repeatable research design. Kvalcova's talk on the effects of freeze-thaw action on blunt force trauma lesions in bone, together with Kate Gafner's offering on the reaction of blunt force trauma lesions to thermal modification, highlighted the importance of clear and repeatable methodologies for practical application to forensic analyses. Both presentations focused on ways in which experimental variables could be controlled in order to record the effects of different

modifications as accurately as possible. Later papers focused on the development of new research designs for specific areas. Micayla Spiros presented a research project on ancestry estimation from postcranial elements. Noting the current focus on cranial remains, Spiros highlighted the need to develop existing methods for ancestry estimation from postcranial elements, in particular the importance of developing a standardised approach and moving on from traditional methods. In the penultimate presentation Lisa Monetti highlighted the need for a revised approach to the analysis of cremation remains, outlining unique aspects of their preservation, and demonstrating the need for a specialised approach for their excavation and forensic analysis.

In contrast to the MSc Bioarchaeology and Forensic Anthropology papers, Jack Lennard from the MA in Cultural Heritage Studies addressed some considerations for researching less quantifiable subjects. His talk on the history and recent gentrification of Soho in London explored ways of studying less traditional forms of heritage. He outlined the concept of anti-heritage, preserved by common consensus rather than officially protected, and argued that current approaches to heritage discourse are unsuitable for studying anti-heritage sites such as Soho. The presentation thus addressed a key issue within cultural heritage studies – the need for an evolving approach to changing perceptions of the nature and role of cultural heritage.

Combining the study of traditionally qualitative subject matter with a more quantitative approach, MSc Archaeological Science: Technology and Materials student Clare Davey presented her project on the study of colour from a scientific perspective. She introduced quantitative approaches to recording and interpreting colour in the archaeological record, with a view to identifying metallurgical objects from the archaeological record where colour was a major factor in the choice of chemical

composition. Through this discussion she demonstrated how new methods in archaeological science allow for the quantitative study of areas previously considered to be subjective, echoing the notions of objective research design outlined earlier in the day.

The MSc Palaeoanthropology and Palaeolithic Archaeology talks presented research on two very different areas of Palaeolithic studies. Annabelle Lockey's paper on the analysis of hominin incisors demonstrated new analytic approaches for dealing with rare and delicate fossil specimens. Non-destructive techniques, such as those she discussed, along with greater ability to share fossil data, have broadened the scope of the questions we can ask of Palaeoanthropological datasets. Finally, Charly Burnell returned to the subject of cognition raised by Nakhaeizadeh's keynote presentation with her talk on the role of working memory in the Middle Stone Age. She raised the question of how we can consider cognitive processes when interpreting Palaeolithic evidence. This demonstrated the merits of considering the problems encountered by hominin populations, the cognitive processes involved in solving them, and how this might be reflected in the assemblages we observe in the archaeological record.

This year the SAMS committee, under the direction of conference coordinator Hayden McKee, orchestrated a conference that demonstrated the impressive range of research being undertaken by masters students throughout UCL Institute of Archaeology. Offerings from different degree courses were interspersed throughout the day, allowing conference attendees to hear presentations from outside their own fields. This led to a great deal of cross-disciplinary discussion, providing speakers with the opportunity to receive questions and comments from alternative academic viewpoints. While facilitating discussion between different

areas of the department, the conference also highlighted the value of the many individual specialisations that contribute to the Institute of Archaeology's diverse body of research.

Competing Interests

At the time of writing the author was a UCL Institute of Archaeology MSc Palaeoanthropology and Palaeolithic Archaeology student.

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