

Excavation and publication: some comments

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 It has long been a commonplace (eg Grinsell *et al* 1966; 1974) that there is a crisis in the publication of archaeological excavations. In brief, too few excavations have been or are being published. In the mid-1970s the Ancient Monuments Board (England) addressed itself to the problem in the so-called 'Frere Report' (AMB England 1975). Considering that this report did not examine deeply enough the principles of archaeological publication, I drafted a review which attempted to be both critical on matters of theory and constructive in practice. My review was condemned, however, as 'aiming at a 2001 situation', and I therefore did not publish it.

1.2 Recently, the Central Excavation Unit, England, has produced a manual of practices, which is largely consistent with my own proposals (Jefferies 1977). Moreover, Dr G J Wainwright, Inspector in charge of the CEU, has conducted seminars throughout Britain to promote these practices. It appeared therefore that my review was as relevant to 1981 as to 2001; and since its philosophical basis differs from Wainwright's, it has seemed worth reviving it for publication. Its practical suggestions should be read in the light of Mytum 1978 and Thompson 1978.

1.3 I am grateful to former students, now professional colleagues, who have encouraged me to publish the paper, and whose advice, both critical and sympathetic, has helped me to improve it, notably J C Barrett, D V Clarke, P Crew, C R Musson and G J Wainwright. I am also grateful to D J Breeze for his more conservative comments.

2 THE PROBLEMS

2.1 Since the publication of *Cranborne Chase* (Pitt Rivers 1887-98), it has been widely (if only intermittently) considered that excavators have a duty to publish their sites and finds in extensive, even exhaustive, detail; total illustration backed by total verbal description. This responsibility has been steadily widened by the increasing recognition of the importance of environmental samples, scientific analysis of artefacts, etc.

2.2 It is now widely realised that exhaustive publication by conventional letterpress in a bound volume is very expensive – perhaps prohibitively expensive in the case of major excavations. The paradox is that an insignificant site with few finds may be published *in toto* in a county journal, whereas it may be extremely difficult to organise and finance the publication of a major site. New methods of printing, etc, can provide at best a palliative.

2.3 It is argued here, however, that the main problem is not expense of money but of time. This is not primarily a reference to the excavator's time; though it should perhaps be recognised

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that a normally active archaeologist might hope to excavate and publish properly only a handful of major sites in a normal working life, unless he is a full-time professional excavator with no other administrative, teaching, etc, duties. That this realistic limitation may not be consistent with the demands of salvage archaeology is another problem; failure to recognise this fact certainly leads to the proliferation of unpublished excavations.

2.4 What is at issue here is readers' time: the time of the interested layman; but more especially of those professionals who have to use the results of excavation to produce syntheses, whether for museum exhibitions, teaching in higher and secondary education, or exposition to that wider public who provide the social justification and motive for the spending of public money on archaeology. As the number of excavations increases, and as the expected length, detail and complexity of excavation reports grow exponentially, so does it become inevitable that archaeologists must read a decreasing fraction of the field; and that increasingly uncritically. The day has long gone when the leisurely and critical reading of half-a-dozen major excavation reports, and perhaps fifty minor ones, could provide the basis for a wholly satisfactory account of the English Iron Age. Yet, if excavation is to have any intellectual meaning, if it is to be anything more than a fun-pursuit, then the creation of syntheses must keep pace with field work and excavation.

2.5 The central problem, then, is to define the correct level and method of publication, which will both do full justice to the results of excavation and also create the opportunities for significant syntheses – without making the latter process too easy. An answer may be found by examining the purpose of publication.

3 THE PURPOSE OF PUBLICATION

3.1 The most obvious reason for what may be called 'total publication' on the *Cranborne Chase* model, (but not the *Maiden Castle* model (Wheeler 1943) for that is confessedly not a total publication) is to record, preserve and disseminate the information or evidence from an excavation.

3.2 In fact, the reason given in 3.1 would generally be regarded as naïve, and more sophisticated arguments are normally advanced. Some typical ones are:

- A From the published account it should be possible to reconstruct the site on paper.
- B It should therefore be possible to re-interpret the site from the published evidence.
- C It should be possible from the report to judge the quality of the excavation, to assess the excavator's skill, percipience, etc, in the field, and thereby to authenticate his recovery of the primary data, as well as the inferences based on them.

These and similar arguments all share the basic belief that the purpose of a report is to introduce the reader as intimately as possible to the primary information, be it structures, layers, potsherds or intestinal parasites.

3.3 The belief that publication in the Pitt Rivers' style enables the reader to authenticate the excavator's observations of the primary evidence, to vindicate his inferences from that evidence, or even to reject them and thus to re-interpret the evidence, has received powerful support from the classic re-interpretations of the Cranborne Chase settlements (Hawkes 1947, 35-78), and of the mortuary enclosure under the Wor Barrow (Piggott 1954, 57-60). But it is a matter of historical fact that such re-interpretations, based not on re-excavation, but simply on a re-consideration of the published evidence, have not multiplied in print since Hawkes and Piggott demonstrated the possibility; and it is a matter of comment that these classic re-interpretations

are of very simple structures. There is no range of clinical experience to show, for instance, that it is possible to re-interpret a complex stratification.

3.4 The arguments advanced in 3.2 A–C are in fact bogus. Given a skilled pictorial presentation of what the excavator took to be the primary evidence (competence in draughtsmanship) and given a reasoned exposition of hypothesis in relation to such evidence as is presented (competence in journalism), there is no way whereby a reader can assess and verify the skill of the excavator in recognising, dissecting and recording the primary data. It is the inevitable limitation of excavation as a means of recovering evidence that what is destroyed unnoticed is gone for ever. In simple logic we can never know what the excavator has failed to recognise, or what he fails to tell us about. We may sometimes suspect, on the basis of both internal and extrinsic discrepancies and inconsistencies, that his observations and records are faulty; but again in simple logic, it is impossible to know what the correct observations should have been.

3.5 Moreover, it can be said that we cannot really judge the quality of an excavator's awareness of his site from his own remarks. If he makes much of the problems of digging and the limitations of the evidence, is this because he is a highly critical and acute observer, getting the most out of the evidence; or a less competent observer who happens to be aware of his own limitations; or simply a constitutional ditherer? Conversely, if the evidence and conclusions are presented in bold and simple lines, in word or drawing, is this because the site was simple; or the excavator has an incisive, critical mind, capable of unravelling satisfactorily the intellectual knots; or the excavator is brash, pig-headed and incapable of comprehending the complexities of the evidence? Some readers may know, through personal contact, the answer to these questions of personality and temperament; but as the army of excavators grows, so it becomes increasingly impossible to know them all, and our judgement must be based, quite unsatisfactorily, on the internal evidence of the style of a report.

3.6 It should be stressed that in all this, no doubt is being cast on the importance of the published report as a means of judging the excavator's competence in the framing and testing of hypotheses, and in making inferences, by logically justified argument, from the observed evidence. The heading of inference here includes not merely refined and remote inferences about socio-economic models, but the initial inferences about structures, stratification, artefacts and their relationships. It is not my present purpose to examine this area: it is enough to say that it would be easy to provide, from excavation reports, a chapter of examples for a text book on elementary logical fallacies.

3.7 As a side line, it may be asked how the excavator's observation, record, and primary interpretation of the evidence is to be vindicated at all, if it cannot be authenticated at the secondary level of detailed publication. In some cases, a partial vindication – or the opposite – may be achieved through further excavation of the same site. This may be readily achieved (though wasteful of effort) on large earthworks, for instance; but with other sites, such as barrows, or emergency digs, supplementary excavation may be impossible because the site no longer exists. The only possibility of authentication seems to lie in the recognition of parallel features, or patterns of coherence, between apparently similar sites. In other words, we might hope to justify the repetitive general characteristics of a group of sites, but not the peculiarities of the individual site. But here, the caveat is needed that once feature X has been recognised on site A, the excavators of A¹, A² . . . will also be looking out for it, and some of them will find it.

3.8 The upshot of all this is that the arguments for the *Cranborne Chase* style of publication advanced in 3.2 are spurious. We are forced back to the view that the purpose of publication

is primarily to convey information. We should now tackle the problem set out in 2.4-5 by asking the interlinked questions: what information (how much, what detail, etc), and for whom?

4 PUBLICATION FOR THE READER

4.1 The only innovation claimed for this discussion is the idea, implicit in 2.4-5, that the interests and needs of the consumer – that is, the reader – should be paramount in publication. If this is accepted, then for the general reader, as well as for the university lecturer preparing his first year course on World Prehistory, or the museum curator designing an exhibit on the Bronze Age in Central Loamshire, the most that is needed is a summary account of major structures, most characteristic finds, and outline site history; with just enough presentation of the basic evidence to demonstrate how the *main stratigraphic sequence is established, and with the excavator's preferred solutions to all problems (structural, stratigraphical, chronological etc), set out and justified as economically as possible.* There will, in fact, be no time to read more. For a major site, the appropriate level of publication might be 40,000-50,000 words, with 100-120 figures and plates, in a hard-cover series; for a medium site, 5,000-10,000 words, 10-20 figures and plates, in a national or county journal; for a minor site, a page in a county journal.

4.2 Is the excavator's responsibility fully discharged by publication at the level of 4.1? The answer is no: because the summary account is not the primary written statement about the excavation, but merely a distillation, at one or two stages of refinement and condensation, of such a primary report.

4.3 What is that primary report? It is nothing less than the fullest possible description, analysis, discussion and illustration of the excavation evidence, structures, stratification, finds, environmental data, etc: in brief, a *Cranborne Chase* style excavation account. We shall see, in 5.1, that it is not intended for conventional publication: and if this is accepted, the question arises why write and illustrate it at all.

4.4 The answer is threefold:

- A The writing of an exhaustive report is necessary to make the excavator face up to the total evidence, in all its inconsistencies and limitations, as well as its strengths and certainties. In a summary account, the inconvenient little pieces of evidence which do not fit the overall pattern can be swept aside with a broad-brush technique; but it is essential, if the truth is to be approached, that the excavator must examine the whole of the evidence and set it out in a coherent, detailed and self-consistent account. Only the excavation director, with his intimate knowledge of the site, can satisfactorily perform this essential task.
- B The corollary of this is that the primary write-up enables the integrity and conscientiousness (but not the technical skill) of the excavator to be checked, and the large inferences of the published account to be challenged not, indeed, by reference to the site itself, but at least in terms of the detailed evidence. Few scholars will have the time or occasion to check or challenge in this way more than a handful of major reports; but it is essential that the opportunity should be available.
- C The primary report contains the detailed information about structures, finds, etc, parts of which will be needed by individual specialist researchers. Their needs have not been catered for by the summary account of 4.1, although this will at least indicate that the site might have something of interest to them, which they should then follow up by direct query to the excavator, or to the museum or archive where finds and site records are deposited, followed by a personal visit.

5 METHOD OF PUBLICATION

5.1 The arguments advanced in 4.4 B and C determine the disposition and availability of the primary report, since they imply that its purpose is not simply to provide raw material to be distilled into the published summary account. The document itself, text and illustrations, must be deposited in a permanent archive. The need for permanence should be stressed, for experience shows that even responsible institutions may wish to divest themselves of the archive material of former members of staff. Within the archive, it must be accessible to researchers, if not on demand, then at least on due notice being given. Copies of the whole, or of relevant parts, must be made available on payment to interested enquirers, perhaps in the form of microfilm or microfiche. (This means, of course, that those who wanted a *Cranborne Chase* style of publication can still obtain it, probably more cheaply than by conventional means, simply by asking for a photocopy of the primary account). Photocopies, probably in micro-form, would be deposited in copyright libraries, in relevant special libraries, such as the National Libraries, and those of the National Museums, the Societies of Antiquaries of London and Scotland, and preferably more widely as well.

5.2 Arrangements to create national archives of site records have been under discussion for some time, but it must be stressed that this is not what is in question here. The primary write-up is not simply a fair copy of the site notebooks, site drawings and find lists. It is a new creation, using the fullest analysis of the site records and post-excavation work to produce a fully documented historical synthesis of the site. As was said in 4.4, this can only be done by the director.

5.3 Because of the necessity that it should be accessible and reproducible (5.1), the physical character of the primary report, as deposited in the archive, will closely resemble a conventional publication in a state of readiness for the printer. That is, it will consist of clean top copy typescript, probably in ring-binders, systematically organised with table of contents and fully cross-referenced indexes; photocopies of illustrations reduced to typescript-page size and inserted as relevant in the text; and folders of original drawings of good quality in ink. Even at this stage, however, certain economies on conventional printing methods (including offset litho) will be possible. For instance, the entire time of copy-editing will be saved. The typescript should be clean, but it need not be camera-ready. Titling and layout of illustrations must be legible, logical and comprehensible; but it need not also be handsome or stylish; bold and clear free-hand lettering might come into its own again to save the dire costs of Letraset.

5.4 Some comment is needed, finally, on the relation of the excavation report to wider syntheses. The excavator should be aware of the immediate cultural and historical implications of his site, or he is not properly capable of excavation. But even on the most liberal interpretation of the primary write-up, an excavation report is not normally the best vehicle for synthesis; and if, in a prestige-seeking desire for such a composition, the reporting of the primary excavation evidence is held up by the endless search for continental near- and non-parallels, then the world of scholarship is deprived of its right to prompt publication. None the less, there are cases where the report is the proper place for wide ranging discussion. These would include instances where the excavation is part of a large programme of research, for instance, on a particular class of site, where the significance of the individual site is only realised in relation to the whole programme; or where the excavation is a break through in a little-known period, culture, or class of site, when the implications of the break-through are again relevant. But in general, works of synthesis demand a different mode of publication from that suggested here.

6 SUMMARY

6.1 This paper argues for the abandonment of conventional methods of publication of excavation reports, whether by letterpress or offset litho, at the exhaustive level established by *Cranborne Chase*. Instead, there should be a primary report, comprehensive in both analysis and discussion of the site evidence, which would be deposited in an archive, and made available on payment, probably in micro-form. This exhaustive primary write-up would then be distilled into an illustrated summary account, which would itself be published in the conventional manner, in book or journal form.

6.2 The case for this innovation has been presented largely in terms of the disadvantages of present methods: especially the expense, of both money and time, for the reader. Nothing would be lost by its adoption: the conventional-minded reader, with leisure, could still obtain an appropriate exhaustive copy by ordering the primary report from the archive. More important, two things would be gained. First, the acceptance of the arguments in 3.3-7 would clear from our minds all the philosophical claptrap about judging the quality and credibility of an excavation from the published report, and about re-interpreting an excavation with reference to the site evidence. Secondly, the appearance in quantity of illustrated site summaries would give us all an opportunity and an incentive to learn what was happening in the next field but one to our own. A greater stimulus to the health and vigour of our discipline would be hard to imagine.

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