


EDITORIAL

 *Constantine – York’s Roman Emperor* is being celebrated in my home town at present, 1700 years after being proclaimed emperor there in AD 306, with an exhibition organised by York Museum curator Elizabeth Hartley and opened by the Princess Royal and Giovanni Brauzzi, Minister of the Italian Embassy. It stays open until 29 October. Visitors can admire the chariot-racing medallion from Trier, featuring winning charioteer *Porphyrius* and lead horse *Fontanus*, as well as the life-sized steaming bronze goose from Constantinople and a remarkable copper-alloy dice-tower from Vettweiss-Froitzheim with an inscription that announces that ‘the Picts are conquered – so the Romans can play’. Perhaps most evocative of all is the head’s worth of auburn hair with jet hair pins in place discovered in a lead-lined coffin when York’s railway station – icon of a new empire – was constructed. In the luxurious catalogue Lindsay-Allason Jones comments: ‘the women of the Roman empire were always changing their hairstyles’ – although the bun wound round at the back was always popular and became, moreover, the only hairstyle to be approved by early Christian Fathers.

But there is a lot more at stake here than the display of a large number of splendid objects. Born in Niš (modern Serbia) to a Romanian father and an Anatolian mother, Constantine was a true child of the kind of Europe that many modern Europeans would also like to live

in: one characterised by jaunty political initiatives, business acumen and social mobility – a role model, in fact, for the first president of the European Union.

Or perhaps not. This talk of Constantine puts me in mind of his mother Helena, and the search for her spade. Helena was a role model too – for a new generation of early Christian heroic women who have perhaps yet to find the biographical status they deserve. Helena was an innkeeper’s daughter, meeting Constantius, according to some accounts when she was 16, and bearing him a son, the future Christian emperor around AD 272. On his rise to stardom Constantius put her aside in favour of Theodora, daughter of the Caesar Maximian, who bore him six more children. Constantine curiously performed a rather similar marital manoeuvre, putting aside his first wife Minervina and son Crispus in favour of another of Maximian’s daughters Fausta (and five more children).



Constantine and his heritage (York Minster).
Photo: Ben Gourley.

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“ EVERY YEAR THEY BUILD A CAR PARK OVER HER ! ”

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Helena was described rather harshly by churchman Philostorgius as ‘no better than a strumpet’, but she held on to her career by astute politics – and by taking up archaeology. She is said to have levelled the Temple of Venus in Jerusalem in order to excavate the Holy Sepulchre from which she retrieved the wood of Christ’s cross and his *titulus*. She had the fragments of wood (or whatever she found) encased in a number of reliquaries, including one inside a porphyry statue of Constantine that stood in the forum in Constantinople, while another was to become the hostage in a middle eastern war. Helena, who began life as a barmaid, ended it at the age of eighty as a Christian saint, which all goes to show that a youthful indiscretion can pay dividends. According to *Wikipedia*, Helena is the patron saint of archaeologists, converts, difficult marriages, divorced people, empresses and (less explicably) Colchester. Although her symbol is the cross or (as an empress) a branch, I have heard that she has been depicted with a spade or shovel, tools preferred by early archaeologists. If any reader can guide me to an example of such iconography – in any medium – I will be eager to print it.

🔍 The scientific analysis of cultural material throws light on social interaction. At least that’s the hope. Analyses such as INAA (Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis) used to characterise pottery fabric, are key instruments in the tool box of major research projects designed to discover social, economic or political patterns. But is that what they do? Our

correspondent Doug Kennett highlights a lively debate currently flaming in the hinterland of Olmec culture. It is hard to do justice to it in a few sentences, but each side has brought a great deal of credit to the engagement by recruiting big names to their ranks in ever larger numbers.

Jeffrey P. Blomster, Hector Neff and Michael D. Glascock began by reporting the results of their researches on Olmec period ceramics in *Science* (307: 18 February 2005). Using INAA to provide chemical signatures of well-known fabrics, they deduced that certain ceramics originated from the San Lorenzo region of the Gulf Coast, suggesting that this area had priority in the creation and spread of Olmec culture – the first unified style and iconographic system in Mesoamerica. Kent V. Flannery, Andrew K. Balkansky, Gary M. Feinman, David C. Grove, Joyce Marcus, Elsa M. Redmond, Robert G. Reynolds, Robert J. Sharer, Charles S. Spencer, and Jason Yaeger were not impressed, and pointed out that INAA does not necessarily trace sherds to a single source (*Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 102/32 August 9, 2005: 11219–11223). Even if it does, that does not mean that pottery or ideas only travelled one way; the interaction might have been reciprocated in some other medium. Furthermore, in another PNAS paper (102/32, 11213–11218), James B. Stoltman, Joyce Marcus, Kent V. Flannery, James H. Burton, and Robert G. Moyle used petrographic thin sections to show that pottery from five Mexican sites had multiple origins and was therefore widely traded. Exchange between the Olmec and their neighbours was evidently a two-way process. The debate, reinforced on both sides, then moved to *Latin American Antiquity* where readers can pursue it.

Clearly these are important matters and we haven't heard the last of them. Maybe two visions of the past are at war, or maybe it is the validity of quantification itself that is on trial. In the old paradigm, alternative visions are models to be tested, but do we always (do we ever) have the right samples for legitimate testing? If such heavyweights are reaching stalemate, it may be that there are answers waiting beyond the field of combat. All of us who want archaeological science to succeed have a high stake in the outcome.

 Our correspondent Jane Grenville draws my attention to the following passage from Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* which premiered in 2004 and set off on its world tour this February. Oxbridge history guru Irwin is doing a piece-to-camera on monasticism for a TV programme:


Ours is an easier faith. Where they revered sanctity we reverence celebrity; they venerated strenuous piety; we venerate supine antiquity. In our catechism old is good, older is better, ancient is best with a bonus on archaeology because it's the closest history comes to shopping.


In an arresting preface to his play, Bennett does an admirable exposure of this kind of academic historian, no longer entirely confined to Oxbridge, who delights in standing everything on its head: 'Having found that the contrary view pays dividends, they seem to make this tone their customary discourse. A sneer is never far away, and there's a persistently jeering note, perhaps bred of the habit of contention'. Speaking about the English dissolution of the monasteries, Irwin goes on to give the TV audience an example of the contrariness

that Bennett finds so annoying:

Whatever we tell ourselves, things matter to us more than people. Not the scattering of communities or the torments of martyrs or the putting of an end to prayer, no, what shocks us today about the Dissolution is the loss of things. Which, since monasticism originated in a flight from things, is something of an irony. So that you could say that it was at the moment of the Dissolution that the monasteries came closest to the ideals of their foundation and that it was thanks to the villain Henry VIII that the monasteries achieved their purpose and their apotheosis.

In history, as in some archaeology, the rhetoric of critique scores more points than new understanding; it's wittier, less vulnerable to contradiction (because it's already absurd); the wonder of discovery beaten into a cocked hat by the elixir of paradox. It puts the speaker, us, our times, our cleverness, centre stage, as opposed to all those boring dead people. But archaeology does not have to go that way. We are not dandies squabbling in a playroom full of treasured toys. We can play the bigger game, as the shirt-sleeved explorers of an immense wilderness. We not only bring new things to light, but new stories and new people; and as Mortimer Wheeler knew, the people matter more to us than the things. And both matter a lot more than our own rhetoric, or should. Irwin and his ilk need to watch out: if they take up the things of archaeology, but ignore its ideas, its stories and the voices of its dead people – that's not shopping, but shop-lifting.

 We are delighted to announce our 2005 prize winners. The Antiquity Prize goes to Eric Thirault for his paper on the Neolithic axe industry in Alpine Europe in the March 2005 issue. The Ben Cullen Prize is awarded to George Lau for his paper, also in the March 2005 issue, on core-periphery relations in the Recuay hinterlands of Peru. For readers for whom time, the thief of youth, has also stolen Ben Cullen's memory, he died on 29 December 1995, a brilliant young researcher in the prime of life. A year later Ian Gollop founded his generous prize in Ben's memory, for 'the best contribution to a volume of *Antiquity* by a researcher of the new generation'. Since authors are not obliged to reveal their age, we interpret 'new generation' with a certain amount of latitude. In general you will be (roughly) under 35 and this will be your first article in *Antiquity*. We remain acutely aware that the most difficult moment in an archaeological career lies between the completion of a research degree and one's first job. The Ben Cullen prize is one kind of helping hand, but *Antiquity* also offers another: put a synopsis of your thesis on our Project Gallery (<http://antiquity.ac.uk>). A large number of people in many countries will see it.

 More recent, sharper sadness: the sudden death of Andrew Sherratt on 24 February 2006 was a bitter blow to his family, to a legion of friends and admirers and to the University of Sheffield where he had just taken up a chair in Old World Prehistory. We also miss Andrew greatly at here *Antiquity* where he was an inspiring director, guide and correspondent. In the next issue, we will offer a tribute to this remarkable scholar.

Martin Carver
York, 1 June 2005