Whither archaeologists? Continuing challenges to field practice

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Research

Current archaeological practice in the UK and elsewhere focuses on the collection of empirical data. While scholars have proposed theoretical advances in field techniques, very few of these methods have been adopted in commercial archaeology. A combination of increased time pressure on development projects and the conservatism of the sector contribute to challenging times for archaeological practice. Additional complexity is introduced by large-scale infrastructure projects unsuited to standardised field techniques. This article explores these issues, calling for a flexible, consultative approach to project design and implementation, to ensure the longevity of both archaeology and the archaeological profession.

Keywords: field archaeology, contracting sector, empiricism, archaeological project design

Introduction

Over 45 years ago, Isaac (1971) and Neustupny (1971) challenged archaeologists with the question: whither archaeology? Despite the revolution in archaeological theory and practice over the subsequent decades, there is much within these articles that still concerns archaeologists: the myth of objectivity (Neustupny 1971: 36); the value of quantitative analysis (Isaac 1971: 126–27); and the importance of the effective communication of results (Isaac 1971: 128; Neustupny 1971: 39). Also of concern is the persistence of the polarisation of the empirical and humanistic ideologies, as described by Isaac (1971) and confirmed, two decades later, by Bintliff (1995). It is, however, not only this polarisation that concerns us here, but also the stasis in the development of fieldwork practice that characterises the contracting sector, and how these issues are now coming to the fore in the face of new challenges. This article explores the persistence of the theory/field divide and its implications for fieldworkers, with particular reference to major, publicly funded infrastructure projects. It goes on to make suggestions for how to break this deadlock and encourage the sector to overcome those challenges and to redefine modern field practice.

Static praxis

Despite theoretical advances in the process of excavation (Hodder 1999, 2000; Andrews *et al.* 2000; Lucas 2001a), the practical tradition of field archaeology in the UK and elsewhere has remained largely unchanged since emphasis was placed on 'preservation by record' (e.g. for England and Wales: Department of the Environment 1990; for the USA: the National Historic Preservation Act and subsequent section 106 review process). Subsequent reforms of the planning system have had little impact upon field methodology and curatorial expectations (Orange & Perring 2017: 144). The significant increase in the number of archaeological

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investigations and the amounts of resulting data have not encouraged methodological advancements, despite significant attempts to broker a discussion (e.g. Andrews *et al.* 2000; Lucas 2001a & b; Chadwick 2003, 2010; Yarrow 2003; Berggren 2012; Thorpe 2012; Fulford & Holbrook 2018; Trow 2018). Thus, the contracting sector remains embedded in the empirical tradition of data recovery, leading to analysis and dissemination through either grey literature (unpublished reports) or formal publication.

In the UK, major infrastructure projects such as the High Speed 2 Rail Link (HS2) offer a 'generational opportunity' (HS2 Ltd 2017: 1) to rethink our methods and techniques. HS2, intended to link London with Birmingham and cities farther north, is just one of a series of major infrastructure projects currently underway in the UK that includes the expansion of roads, airports and the energy and aggregates industries. These projects employ hundreds of archaeologists, and, consequently, the UK commercial archaeology workforce is now the largest it has ever been (Landward Research Ltd 2019: 3). While this employment is undoubtedly positive for the sector, the design of a new methodology for the HS2 project—with a theoretical basis of 'knowledge creation' rather than the traditional 'preservation by record'—confronts our intrinsic values and is the subject of much debate amongst field archaeologists (HS2 Ltd 2017: 2). Although calls from UK sector leaders, such as professional bodies (e.g. CIfA) and Government agencies (e.g. Historic England), for a shift from 'outcome' to 'impact' (Nixon 2017: 15) are laudable, rarely are the effects on archaeological practitioners themselves considered. Nor is there any certainty that these major infrastructure projects will provide long-term benefit for the employment conditions and career prospects of archaeologists (Rocks-Macqueen 2018). At the time of writing (March 2019), contributions to the debate by archaeological practitioners on whether the upturn in work specific to infrastructure will have been beneficial to the profession have in fact raised concerns about its impact (Zorzin 2016; Caruso *et al.* 2018); it remains unclear the degree to which the methodological innovations demanded by the HS2 project (HS2 Ltd 2017: 2) might be fulfilled.

The rescue tradition

My own career developed in London, where 'salvage' archaeology has a noble past, with evocative accounts of desperate excavation circumstances entering the professional lexicon (e.g. Grimes 1968; Noel-Hume 1978). We can now reflect that, in the UK, this provides a kind of 'foundation myth' for our profession, with little critical awareness of the myriad difficulties (e.g. the fragmented, competitive nature of the contracting sector) that have perpetuated and, arguably, held back the development of a mature and respected occupation. In the UK, where the link between the competitive market and archaeology has been strong (Aitchison 2010: 28), changes in legislative frameworks and the impact of developer-funded mitigation (Department of the Environment 1990) and competitive tendering on the profession have all been assessed in depth (e.g. Everill 2009; Thorpe 2015; Wilson 2016). In the USA, the vast majority of archaeological work is carried out in response to development and is privately funded (Altschul 2017). A similar process has been operational in France since 2003, when a previously public system was opened up to commercialisation, a move seen by Demoule (2010: 13) as purely ideological and in contravention of the opinions of

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the scientific community. Darnault (2018) confirms that this change has not been positive, least of all for the archaeologists themselves.

The 'boom and bust' nature of the UK construction industry has left the contracting aspect of the discipline "in tatters" (Everill 2015: xi); the situation is worse across Southern Europe (Guermandi 2016). Although attempts to bring together academic and commercial work in the USA are underway (Heilen *et al.* 2016), the ongoing political hostility, as exemplified by reduced protection for National Parks and the streamlining of planning regulation, has disrupted the sector. In the UK, employers within the contracting sector have suggested that the current system is not fit for purpose (e.g. Cooper-Reade 2015: 35; Walker 2015; D. Jennings *pers. comm.*), but management structures are dominated by archaeologists who oversaw the advent and development of the status quo and are thus bound into its framework. While there have been positive developments with the synthesis of data from development-led projects (e.g. Fulford & Holbrook 2015; Green *et al.* 2017), any progress excludes change in the nature of fieldwork. While clearly a very positive aspiration, it remains unclear how Nixon's (2017: 11) call for a "completely new workforce model" will come about, particularly as infrastructure projects often require large teams, working long hours on short-term projects in remote locations. 'Rescue' archaeology remains a potent concept internationally, with the central ideal of the 'polluter pays' forming the basis for policy, whether centrally organised or commercially funded (Thorpe 2015: 185–90; Novaković *et al.* 2016). Since the inception of this market-driven system, there have been concerns that it is entirely inappropriate for archaeology and research (e.g. Biddle 1994; Graves-Brown 1997), but it has persisted within the vacuum created by a lack of alternative models. The result is rarely research- or quality-led (Carver 2011), but rather driven by market conditions, a situation worsened by the decline of the UK curatorial sector due to government austerity policies (Trow 2018: 91–92).

Into this void comes the HS2 project, demanding wholesale reconsideration of the very concept of excavation as a means to 'preserve' archaeology (HS2 Ltd 2017: 102). This challenges a generation for whom preservation by record represents the bedrock of practice, and who remain unchanged due to a reluctance to abandon this principle (Lucas 2001b: 37; Demoule 2011: 8). Although innovative project designs and papers regularly call for new fieldwork methods, such as selective sampling, the techniques used in the field remain unchanged (HS2 Ltd 2017; Fulford & Holbrook 2018; Trow 2018).

Reflexive practice?

A historiographical perspective demonstrates that archaeologists have always been aware of their subjectivity; from Pitt-Rivers to Petrie, there has been suspicion that results might fit preconceptions (Carver 2009: 27). In turn, this has led to a preoccupation with objectivity in data collection. It is this optimistically framed empiricism that dominates commercial archaeology today, even though insufficient priority is given to the opportunity to alter or adapt the recovery of primary data during fieldwork to maximise its research potential (Fulford & Holbrook 2018: 217), and there is an awareness that rigid project designs restrict the ability to react to discoveries and adapt accordingly. Nor does the onus on the recovery of data encourage interpretation by the fieldworkers (Berggren & Hodder 2003: 425). It has long

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been acknowledged that the repetitive nature of fieldwork tasks, when undertaken in combination with pro-forma recording sheets, could in fact "blunt understanding" (Lucas 2001b: 43).

The fundamental belief in the efficacy of the stratigraphic context recording system, combining theory, method and practice (Spence 1993), persists, and we have retained the formalised division of description and interpretation, confident that it is the most efficient means of ensuring that programme and budgetary constraints are met. In England, Framework Archaeology was established in 1998 as a joint venture between two major contracting companies and was intended to increase interpretative potential by upscaling the agency of field teams and to gain a broader understanding of how past landscapes were inhabited (Andrews *et al.* 2000; Barrett 2016: 137). This approach has not been repeated beyond the umbrella of British Airport Authority projects (Fulford & Holbrook 2018: 220), despite the fact that there have been many similar large-scale projects since. Framework Archaeology was influenced by Hodder's reflexive methodology (1997, 1999, 2000), which was developed in the context of work at Çatalhöyük, although both the theory and practice of Hodder's approach have been critiqued (Hassan 1997; Farid 2000: 27–29; Chadwick 2010: 7). Bender *et al.* (1997) employed a hybrid version of the Çatalhöyük methods, the published results incorporating alternative methods of presenting the data. Lucas (2001a: 15), however, remains unconvinced that this approach increased the contribution to knowledge, suggesting that the project team remained wedded to existing thinking and methods (Wilmore 2006: 119). Nonetheless, Historic England is now encouraging the reflexive approach (Trow 2018: 91) even though we still lack a critical review of the Framework Archaeology project and its outputs. Yet, we must move towards a situation where some semblance of fluidity is introduced to fieldwork, while maintaining systems that allow for systematic comparison and synthesis (Fulford & Holbrook 2018: 224). Whether current systems with pro-forma and tick-box recording systems facilitate fluid, intensive interpretation is debatable. Reflexive recording may expand interpretative potential, but the inclusion of the resulting material in final site reports remains a challenge that has not yet been demonstrated successfully.

Fieldwork as research

The introduction of theory-driven research agendas into developer-funded practice presents other challenges. Insightful studies of fieldwork and fieldworkers (Lucas 2001a; Edgeworth 2011) have had no obvious influence on modern practice. Any education in archaeological theory—a post-graduate education is common in the field—is left behind as soon as one's site boots are laced.

Undergraduate fieldwork guides (e.g. Roskams 2001) are not read, after graduation, in site huts; instead, field manuals become the new reference texts (e.g. UK: Westman 1994; English Heritage 2010) and skills are developed through on-site mentoring. There are few rewards for expertise in fieldwork, with little investment in the maintenance or development of skills. Nor is the intellectual capacity of field archaeologists fully utilised, with little opportunity to apply academic knowledge when in the field. The loss of experienced fieldworkers from the profession remains a major problem, as interpretative skills take time to acquire (Holbrook 2015: 75; Powesland 2015: 116). Contractors rely on 'safe' pairs of hands to

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supervise challenging projects, and this reliance on experience rather than on the mechanical application of method signposts the presence of subjectivity, despite the belief that excavation is an objective process. The fundamental differences in practice between experienced or specialised staff and those less familiar with systems are consistently downplayed, yet to embrace such crucial adaptations to circumstances might liberate us from the 'rote' approach to which we have bound ourselves.

Berggren and Hodder (2003: 431) recognise the skill inherent in excavation, but issue a challenge: to increase our intellectual contribution, we must engage with and adopt methods of self-reflection. They also acknowledge the 'intractable' (Berggren & Hodder 2003: 432) problems associated with increasing the value of excavation. This challenge is even more intractable in the context of major infrastructure schemes with complex procurement systems and this may partly explain why the Framework Archaeology approach has not been more widely adopted (Fulford & Holbrook 2018: 220).

Excavation remains the most common form of archaeological investigation and many aspects of archaeology rely upon it, including most scientific dating techniques (Cherry 2011: 13). While there is growing familiarity with technology, the intrinsic value of a muddy paper archive remains potent (Yarrow 2008: 129). Critics have raised issues about the potential of restricted access to digital media and a lack of democracy with regard to training and funding around the use of digital methods (Chadwick 2010: 12; Morgan & Wright 2018), although these concerns could be remedied by ensuring that each team member has access and control over the same information. The creation of a site-wide, fluid interpretation during excavation is theoretically possible (Lewis 2006; Dufton 2016; Fulford & Holbrook 2018), as well as crucial for the adaptive approach to the designs required for infrastructure projects.

The sense that field teams are 'outside' encourages fieldworkers to form strong interpersonal relationships, with an often defiant group mentality. The urgency that grips many commercial projects has cemented this attitude, as the full participation of every team member is the only way to complete a project. We need to harness this collaborative approach at an earlier stage in the archaeological process. Modern practice has no room for multi-vocality and denies the voice of the field teams. We are failing to democratise our decision-making by not consulting all project participants and adapting our methods accordingly.

Infrastructure projects rarely employ local archaeologists, instead relying on large imported teams that move from site to site. The commercial necessity for contractors to band together in joint ventures further complicates collaboration due to the variety and complexity of different international methodological traditions (Holtorf 2006: 83). The introduction of methods that alter embedded power structures and shift the focus from empirical, processual approaches will not be a simple evolution for the contracting sector, but, as Trow (2018: 97) suggests, there is support amongst curatorial and funding bodies.

Current and future realities

To counter the problem of hierarchical structures and encourage participation among field teams, a new approach to project design is required—one that is significantly more adaptive and collaborative. Recording methods should be expanded to incorporate the

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acknowledgement of the participation in interpretation by field archaeologists, and expand their input beyond the current restrictions of pro-forma methods. There will be significant requirements for training current and future archaeological staff (Berggren & Hodder 2003: 429) to facilitate the collaborative and responsive research that is often absent on developer-led projects (even though it is a central tenet of professional standards (Chartered Institute for Archaeologists 2014)). A UK-wide review of the past 25 years of developer-led archaeology has examined many aspects of the sector (Wills 2018), but does not include the development of fieldwork techniques specifically (although Trow (2018) does discuss the need for more research-led investigations).

We must attempt to link the worlds of academic and field archaeology while acknowledging that some aspects of theory-driven fieldwork may be unsuited to the contracting sector (Hamilton 1999: 5; Thorpe 2012: 48). It would be preferable to also link excavation and analysis at the earliest opportunity in the process, an objective attempted by Framework Archaeology yet not pursued by subsequent projects. This objective requires excavation to be intellectualised through the research-led adaptation of processes during fieldwork and the provision of specialists and processing systems throughout project design and excavation. To convince contractors and developers of this, we need to embed complex decision-making informed by academic goals, as acknowledged by Fulford and Holbrook (2018: 220), using the faith placed by contractors in objective setting and programmable targets. Archaeology could fit well with this model if we set measurable milestones and formally embed consultation throughout fieldwork stages. Multi-vocality is one of many ways that we could adapt to the challenges facing our profession, the principal of which may be to recognise the inherent weaknesses in the assumption of absolute objectivity. Here, the academic minority is ahead of the practising majority, and those with feet in both camps perhaps view the current conservatism as a lack of ambition (e.g. Evans 2012).

The high calibre of field archaeologists is recognised by the most respected academics (e.g. Millett 2017: 37), and archaeological practitioners today are more aware than ever of the problems with their profession. We need to be more open to discussion and fluidity of field methods during fieldwork, and I argue that it is the field teams who should form the basis of this change. It is crucial to review past attempts at updating systems to ensure that we learn from past experiences, by incorporating the experiences of fieldworkers, reflexively, into our ongoing practice, including its management and planning.

When reflection on fieldwork demonstrates stasis and an adherence to tradition it is imperative that we acknowledge the potential benefits that change might bring. The opportunity to widen participation must not be squandered, yet the hierarchical "militant managerialism" currently in operation across commercial archaeology (Cumberpatch 2015: 270) does not foster debate or inclusion of the 'voiceless' (Lucas 2001a: 12). The field archaeologists crucial for implementation of these changes should be consulted, included and integrated into new systems of work, to ensure these systems' continued relevance.

Infrastructure clients with inflexible procurement procedures should be encouraged to understand the necessary complexity of archaeological projects. The onus, however, must come from the practising organisations themselves, working with the curatorial sector to move away from the rigid project designs of the past. While Trow (2018: 97) acknowledges the need for a multi-disciplinary approach, the embedded conservatism established in the

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early days of developer-led archaeology do not encourage confidence in the capacity of the sector as a whole to organise in pursuit of change. A generation of archaeologists who have relied upon legal frameworks to justify its existence now finds itself out of date. It can be hoped, however, that the next generation of project managers and curators will take up the challenge. The question of 'whither archaeology' should be extended to include archaeologists themselves—those who are most capable of contributing to the design and implementation of innovative ways of working that will revolutionise archaeological practice for all.

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