

Archaeological Working Conditions and Public Perception

Paul Everill and Peter A. Young

The Topic

How do the on-the-ground realities of archaeological fieldwork mesh with how the process and findings of archaeology are presented to the general public in print media such as Archaeology Magazine? Do you feel that most aspects of field archaeology are described accurately? Are there aspects that aren't? What do you think the reading public thinks about archaeology? In your experience, what makes a good archaeological story?

Archaeological Working Conditions and Public Perception – Part I

Paul Everill

Apart from brief periods in my youth when I considered being a journalist or joining the Royal Navy I have always wanted to be an archaeologist and I'm happy in hindsight that I made the right choice. I say that it was me that made the choice, but there persists in me a peculiar, underlying feeling that somehow archaeology chose me. I don't recall precisely the moment that I knew I wanted to be an archaeologist, but vague childhood memories of finding a cow jaw in a vegetable patch and visiting historical sites with my parents seem key to my developing interest. As I grew older and pursued the subject more vigorously I can even say, in all honesty, that I was not swayed by the Indiana Jones films. Though it might sound somewhat unlikely, it wasn't the exotic adventures of Dr Henry Jones Jr. that inspired me, but photographs of archaeologists working on grimy city centre sites in the mid 1980s. Somehow, in amongst the warnings about low pay and the difficulties of finding and retaining employment, there was a sense that these excavators were able to physically engage with history in a way that very few people could. And perhaps, more than that, there was a boyish fascination with the idea of being one of those 'authorized personnel' who could work on the site sealed off from the outside world – the normal world – by wooden hoarding or mesh fence.

That fascination and enthusiasm remained with me when I went to work in commercial archaeology, though of course I'd be lying if I said there weren't some days when the prospect of the cold and the mud, or a hangover, made it harder to get out of bed. And yet, throughout it all, I

remembered the daily dread I faced when I used to work in a factory. I still recall that early morning nausea of realization that I would rather be doing pretty much anything else. How different it felt to wake up and actually look forward to getting to work, getting back to a feature I was working on, looking forward to the satisfaction of hard physical work that also often challenged my mind. Largely, of course, I was also looking forward to the camaraderie that underpinned much of our enjoyment of the job.

The gulf between the public perception and the reality of archaeology is never wider than when one considers the commercial, contract sector. Whenever I met someone with an outside interest I often found myself fending off the same set of questions, normally demonstrating a very particular view of archaeology, i.e. ‘where’s the most exciting place you’ve worked?’; ‘what’s the most exciting find you’ve had?’ etc. I suspect my answers, like those of most commercial archaeologists, were of a great disappointment to the questioner. However, when I described the thrill I got from finding a complete Romano-British pot with the potter’s thumb prints round the rim I was, to their surprise, being serious. For me, and I suspect most archaeologists, the enjoyment of excavation is more about revealing the mundane, everyday activities of ordinary people – people like us – than it was ever about gold and kings.

When I left the commercial sector to start my PhD it was a move borne out of a frustration with the pace of my career. By then I was almost 30 and wanted more financial security and more responsibility. I had also become increasingly interested by the factors that kept ‘diggers’ (the equivalent of ‘shovel bums’ in the US) in the profession when everything seemed so stacked against them – i.e. the lowest graduate wage in the country; poor career structure; short, fixed-term contracts; hard physical work in all weather etc. – and so my doctoral research became an investigation of those issues. It demonstrated that British commercial archaeologists (and I have no reason to suppose it is any different across the globe) remain in the profession, despite its many problems, solely for the love of ‘the archaeology’ – by this I mean the remains themselves as well as the physical engagement with them. However, the camaraderie that many experience is also a huge factor in their enjoyment of the job, as is the feeling that archaeology somehow occupies a liminal place in society, far removed from the 9-5 office jobs and assembly lines.

Images of commercial, contract archaeologists such as those that appear on Dave Webb’s British ‘Diggers Alternative Archive’ website, and those that were published in a short article on ‘shovel bums’ in *Archaeology* magazine in Spring 2008, represent very useful reminders to those

external to, and on the periphery of, the profession – by which I mean largely, with all due respect, those with an amateur or passing interest in archaeology – that ‘contract’, ‘commercial’, ‘developer-led’ archaeologists often make a huge number of sacrifices to pursue their vocation. Weeks spent in Bed & Breakfast accommodation hold some appeal, largely in towns where the daily subsistence bonus can be spent on cheap beer, but many archaeologists soon tire of this and begin to wonder why they are paying rent at their home when they are hardly there to enjoy it.

I now teach archaeology to the next generation of ‘diggers’ and am quite happy to talk to them about the difficulties of gaining and retaining employment in the contract sector. Personal experience and recent statistics in the UK suggest that only 10% to 15% of each graduating year will pursue a career in archaeology, and perhaps they, like those before them, do so with a full appreciation of the sacrifices they need to make.

I doubt that anyone who lacks experience of commercial, contract archaeology fully understands the hardships of working in that sector. Perhaps they also don’t understand what it is that attracts people to a life as a ‘digger’, or a ‘shovel bum’. My research suggested a number of positive aspects to the job, but perhaps also indicated that it was certain types of people that were predominantly attracted to it. Either way, the huge drop-off in numbers after five years in the job demonstrated by my survey shows that very few see a long term future for themselves, and one can only imagine that this reality will become much harsher during the current global economic crisis. However, it seems entirely possible that the low wages and poor conditions of employment experienced by many archaeologists would be inconceivable if the general population – particularly those with a professed interest in history and heritage – really understood and valued what goes on behind those wooden hoardings and mesh fences.

Archaeological Working Conditions and Public Perception – Part II: In Praise of the Storytellers

Peter A. Young

This fall, I will have spent two memorable decades as editor in chief of *Archaeology* magazine. These years have been marked by working friendships with some of the best storytellers in the business: archaeologists and specialists with gripping tales and a willingness to share them with the world. No one was more passionate about archaeological discovery than the late Mayanist Linda Schele, who once exclaimed, after discovering the celestial origins of the Maya creation myth, ‘It was like being able to read Genesis in the heavens’. Linda’s flair for communicating the excitement of translating Maya glyphs convinced me early on that the past has the power to surprise and delight, and in the hands of adept professionals it can offer some powerful stories.

In my first few years at the magazine, readers learned that Custer was whipped not by overwhelming numbers of Lakota and Cheyenne, but by superior strategies and firearms; that the Dark Ages were not so dark after all, but rather were alive with merchant adventurers laying the foundation of modern Europe. And that slavery was prevalent in the north on the eve of the American Revolution. Who knew that the first Israelites were actually Canaanite herders turned farmers after the demise of the big city states, that the Exodus was more likely a trickle of enslaved Israelites fleeing the bondage of Egypt and that the Conquest of the Promised Land was not about a rampaging band of desert nomads wiping out everyone in their path; the story was rather a powerful political metaphor for a profound social transformation in Canaan. These and other stories led me to conclude – erroneously, according to one historian – that our magazine could actually preempt the historical record with discoveries that illuminated the actual rather than the imagined past.

My introduction to archaeology was far different than that of my British colleague Paul Everill. At the time I was hired, I knew absolutely nothing about archaeology, a fact that raised eyebrows among some of the first scholars I encountered. Even close friends would ask: ‘Why archaeology?’. Actually, I had been looking for an editorial position with a publication that would allow me to be an intermediary between a scholarly community and the general public. When I saw just such a position at *Archaeology* advertised in the Sunday *New York Times*, I

jumped at the opportunity. In hiring me, the magazine's publisher, Phyllis Katz, made it clear that her interest was in making the magazine a more readable one, that I had the experience to pull that off, and that, as far as archaeology was concerned, I'd simply pick that up along the way.

Not all that easy, as I soon discovered. Covering my first annual meetings in search of promising story ideas was like wandering through the Tower of Babel. What to make of processual paradigms and hypothetico-deductive models? What was the 'new' archaeology all about? And those unabashedly arcane papers with titles like 'Rock Art as an Indicator of Early Upland Aggregation Sites in the Northern Great Basin', 'Anti-Passive Constructions in Glyphic Texts', and 'Technotypologic Patterns in the Levantine Mousterian'?

Running into Linda Schele early on at a conference of anthropologists was serendipitous. Here was a scholar, I thought, with a flair for communicating the excitement of research and discovery; whose intelligence, acute intuition, and long hours pouring over Maya glyphs had allowed her to conceive of the world like a Maya. A born storyteller, Linda once confided: 'The job I seem to have now is to provide a public voice—you know, give people access to things scholars learn from the archaeology, combine it with the interpretations of the glyphs and imagery, the work of people who study the modern Maya, and the approaches of many disciplines, and say to the public, 'Listen, folks, let me tell you a story about a great king!'. When Linda died of pancreatic cancer in the spring of 1998, colleagues mourned the loss of her scholarship. I would miss her stories.

I was soon meeting a host of terrific storytellers: Egyptologist Bob Brier, whose tales of mummy making and how the Great Pyramid at Giza was really built became major feature stories; University of Florida's Jerry Milanich, whose excavations at Spanish mission sites in the American southeast had rewritten that state's colonial history; and nautical archaeologist James Delgado, whose underwater adventures included a dive on the remains of a thirteenth-century wreck from an invasion fleet sent by Kublai Khan to conquer the Japanese, as well as a dramatic personal encounter with *Titanic*.

Contract archaeology became a special concern of ours simply because there was so much of it. Alan Pastron introduced our readers to the field of cultural resource management (CRM) with his extraordinary excavation of a general store, entombed in 1851 by a devastating waterfront fire, and which lay beneath the streets of San Francisco on a plot of land to be occupied by a new bank; one of our editors tracked the progress of an enormous excavation of poorhouse burials along the New Jersey Turnpike, in advance of a highway interchange project.

Fascinated by contract archaeologists with whom she had once labored, freelance photographer Lauren Lancaster spent a week recording their every move in an essay titled ‘Shovelbums’, a poignant, sometimes melancholy collection of photographs showing the employees of Panamerican Consultants, Inc, working on a years-long CRM project at Fort Benning, Georgia. Lancaster spent a week with the team, capturing them both in the field digging test pits in 110 degree weather and in the dreary motels where they spent their downtime. ‘There are many angles I could take to the story’, Lancaster wrote in her proposal. ‘The anthropologist in me is drawn toward an excavation with interesting characters. Going back into that world as an outside observer, I was struck by how much the CRM experience seemed lonelier than I remembered’.

Were the archeologists as surprised as I by what they were discovering? And could I get them to communicate that excitement to our readers?

‘Archaeology is all about surprises’, David Hurst Thomas, curator of North American Archaeology at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, told me. ‘We remember well those rare moments when we set out looking for evidence that might significantly alter our understanding of human history—and actually found it’. Milanich confides: ‘if scholars rarely share their personal stories, it’s probably because they aren’t invited to. In fact, we’re eager to convey the thrill of what we do. And why not? It’s our emotional involvement with the past that drives archaeological discovery’.

But getting archaeologists to be evocative and personal about what they do was not always so easy. Many found archaeological journalism beneath them—that writing for the public was time-consuming and otherwise useless in advancing one’s status or enhancing an academic reputation with one’s peers. One critic went so far as to say that the academic use of impenetrable jargon might impress one’s colleagues while keeping one safely aloof from the curious masses, but it contributed nothing to the public’s understanding of the archaeological process. Was that so bad? A classics professor who had made an on-camera appearance in the *Time-Life Lost Civilizations* series on NBC warned that those who thought that way, who preferred to be consigned to antiquarian isolation, would wake up one day to find that Greece and Rome had really become lost civilizations.

We have also been criticized for publishing more glitz and glamour than hard archaeological data, particularly of the kind gleaned from long hours in the trenches, about which we allegedly report far too little. My response has been that where the fieldwork is not only important but interesting in and of itself to our readers, we give it ample space. An article

we published on dating of the Great Pyramid (September/October 1999) went into great detail on the pure fieldwork that led to both evidence of age as well as clues to the fabric of Egyptian life. If, however, the fieldwork becomes tedious in the telling, we trim it or risk losing readers.

Our editorial guidelines make it quite clear: ‘it is important to remember that less than one-half percent of our readers are professional archaeologists. Your proposed article must clearly spell out why the other 99.5 percent of our readers – bank tellers, doctors, librarians, corporate raiders – would be interested in your story. Some research – say, the variance in arsenic levels of metal objects produced in the Near East from the beginning to the end of the Assyrian period – is a hard sell for a popular publication’.

This book is devoted to the relevance of archaeology. Let me close with this anecdote.

A middle-aged investment banker approached me at a cocktail party not long ago. In an attempt at polite conversation, he asked whether our magazine had ever been first to break a really big story. I explained that while a bimonthly rarely beats out the daily or weekly press, we do, on occasion, publish provocative new theories, one of which, I noted, had revealed how archaic Homo sapiens in Europe evolved into Neanderthals, even though they were isolated from populations in Africa and the Near East -- hardly a King Tut tale or the latest take on the Dead Sea Scrolls that he might have been expecting. After dutifully listened for a moment, he excused himself and slipped away.

This encounter often comes to mind when I am deliberating over a tempting story pitch. More often than not, I am compelled to ask: Why should our readers care to know about the topic? How does this new piece of information relate to them. Had the banker known that according to some theories he might well be part Neanderthal himself, or that we intended to publish a piece about cloning Neanderthals, he might have rallied and stuck out the conversation – and opened his mind to the relevance of the countless discoveries we present in this magazine, issue after issue.

Archaeology is as much about today as it is about yesterday. A friend once asked, ‘When does something become archaeological?’ ‘Now!’ I replied.

Archaeological Working Conditions and Public Perception – Final Thoughts

Paul Everill

It is impossible to read the previous two essays without being struck by the apparent disconnect between the daily working life of an archaeologist (particularly those employed in the commercial/ contract sector) and the public face of archaeology. Peter Young's long involvement with archaeology has brought to the public a wealth of exciting discoveries. His and other magazines have no doubt provided an essential vehicle for the work of archaeologists to be read and enjoyed by people who have a right to learn about the work that is being done, in effect, in their name. As archaeologists, whom are we working for? Are we simply working for the developer who pays the invoice, or the funding body that provides the grant? Or are we working to illuminate our past for the benefit of everyone? One might argue that, if the answer to that last question is no, then why is the work important enough to warrant funding at all?

However, there remains a disconnect. For every one of the great archaeological storytellers, who are able to excite their audience with tremendous, groundbreaking excavations, there remain thousands of ordinary excavators who are literally doing the groundbreaking. These people – the diggers and shovel bums – work in all weather, for poor pay and often on short-term or insecure contracts. The vast majority of archaeology undertaken across the globe, let's be honest, is not glamorous. It won't feature in a magazine, and is even unlikely to feature in a local newspaper. Does that mean it is worthless? Of course not. It is an academic endeavour, founded on an ancient belief that the past is worth studying and learning from.

It is true, of course, that stories in popular magazines lauding the application of sound archaeological practice for its own sake, or the development of new excavation methodology are not going to sell magazines – and this is ultimately the prime concern of editors. At the other extreme, you could argue, academic journals are unlikely to publish articles that are particularly accessible, let alone exciting, to potentially interested members of the public. So commercial archaeologists in particular fall down the crack between the two camps, and find themselves very often misunderstood by those that are paying the bills – developers and public bodies. I choose to focus here on the commercial/ contract sector, because this is where the disconnect is most important. How can someone employed within developer-led archaeology (and I include all levels of the profession, many of whom could earn more in a comparable sector) expect public

support for their campaigns for better pay and working conditions when the public simply have no idea about the nature of their work? Ultimately one could argue that the public are actually not that interested in the nuts and bolts of archaeological fieldwork and general working conditions. They want the big stories, summarised into well-written, accessible articles on topics to which they feel a connection. And there's the irony. When I found that complete Romano-British pot, with the potter's thumbprints round the rim, I had a tangible connection with someone who lived 1,800 years ago. At the time they made that pot they were going about their normal work, developing strategies for survival. Perhaps they were trying to raise a family as best they could, while faced with daily worries about putting food on the table, illness and the uncertainty of the future. Not exciting or glamorous, just human and priceless.