**TYRANNICAL TALES? FICTION AS ARCHAEOLOGICAL METHOD**

**TAG BRADFORD 2015**

**The cornflakes of prehistory: the nature of fact and fiction in archaeology**

**Caroline WICKHAM-JONES**

This paper explores the boundary between fiction and fact in archaeological writing. Looking back to a time when the two were blurred it is possible to consider the nature of fact in archaeology, the value that we place upon interpretation, and the role of fiction in teaching. If we accept that fact is rarely objective, we open the way to the introduction of new sources of information and to wider interpretations. Once we can get away from ascribing a spurious factual nature to our ‘interpretive’ site reports then it becomes clear that we are dealing with a grey scale of communication. If we are to produce ‘archaeology for all’ then it is important to value a wide range of skills and sources in addition to those of the traditional archaeologist.

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**Writing wonders: poetry as archaeological method?**

**Erin KAVANAGH**

*“Archaeology is the search for fact. Not truth. If its truth you’re interested in, Doctor Tyree’s Philosophy class is right down the hall”. (Indiana Jones, 1989*)

Fact, fiction, it’s a dialectical debate that both crosses and divides disciplines from archaeology to philosophy. Questions of truth value via authenticity, authority and provenance abound alongside those of definition in theory and practice. However, this paper argues that maybe, on occasion, it really doesn’t matter if we cannot tell fact from fiction — assuming that such telling is even possible. Instead, the blurring of this normative line may open an intersection in which our minds can engage in alternative ways of thinking to those that our academic and professional training usually dictates.

Poetry sits in this intersection. It affords both the writer and the reader room to explore a variety of perspectives in a succinct form. Akin to a photograph it can be both art and reportage, a snapshot in which to hold a moment or to expand a concept, empowering us to “seize back the creative initiative” (Eshun and Madge 2012). As archaeologists we not only have a responsibility to the cultures we are representing, but also to the process by which we achieve this with one another — and to ourselves. The diktat of site reporting can be at odds with the demotic positon we inhabit as living beings (Pluciennik 2015) which can strip away the emotional meaning we glean from the wonders we are uncovering; and in so doing the whole reason we began archaeology in the first place. Thus perhaps it is time to consider whether or not we can allow ourselves a small platform on which to regain and express the wonder we feel when we hold a pot, discover a mosaic, or make a leap of interpretation.

For if we are writing about wonders, can we therefore not do so wonderfully?

Questions of

theory and practice

open an intersection

in alternative ways of thinking

wonderfully

**Try walking in my shoes: empathy and archaeology**

**Robert WITCHER (Durham University) and Daan VAN HELDEN (University of Leicester)**

When practicing archaeology, we turn to our ratio. We are both trained and expected to evaluate evidence critically and objectively in order to achieve the best possible understanding of the archaeological record. There are, however, other intellectual ways of engaging with the past, for example, through emotional connections such as empathy. Indeed, empathy is an important part of our existing academic toolkit, though its role in archaeological interpretation is often implicit. By contrast, writers of historical fiction (and more generally, TV producers, film directors, etc.) make much more explicit—and effective—use of imagination and emotions such as empathy.

In this paper, we explore the ways in which creators of historical fiction use empathy and consider if and how empathy might be used more explicitly and profitably by archaeologists. Illustrating our paper with examples of published fiction, set in the Roman world as well as other periods, we will explore whether empathy with people in the past is possible, if and how it might vary by context (e.g. period or place), and whether or not this practice can improve (academic) understanding of the past. In other words, can we harness the power of fiction to aid our scholarly endeavour? Most importantly, does it have the potential to change not only how and what we write, but how we understand the past? Or, by erasing the distinction between archaeologist and novelist, and between fact and fiction, is there a risk that “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”?

*The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters. “Fantasy abandoned by reason produces impossible monsters: united with her, she is the mother of the arts and the origin of their marvels”. Francisco Goya c.1799.*

When practicing archaeology

we evaluate the past.

By contrast, writers

Of explicit empathy

explore the world with people in it,

understanding the power

of fiction to change

how the archaeologist

produces monsters

**Imagined realities in the portrayal and investigation of the British Mesolithic**

**Don HENSON (University of York)**

Fiction can be a powerful way of imagining the past. Examining how the Mesolithic has been communicated is part of my PhD research into public perceptions of the Mesolithic. The starting point for this paper is the words of novelist Margaret Elphinstone: “In the blank spaces between the words of archaeological narrative lie the buried kernels of all the forgotten stories”. This paper will explore the dissonance between academic portrayals of the Mesolithic and portrayals of the period in fictional novels and short stories. I will look at the range of narrative elements presented: characters in settings carrying out actions which may be affected by external happenings. Whereas archaeology of the Mesolithic is good at conveying settings and happenings, I will argue that it is to fiction that we must turn for an exploration of characters and actions. This in turn should deliver a better appreciation of what we should be seeking to recover through our research. We need to move beyond seeing Mesolithic people as hunter-gatherers and towards a more rounded view of them as people, and to think how we might recover aspects of life higher up Hawkes's ladder of inference than the purely technological and economic.

Examining

public perceptions

in the blank spaces

between stories

this paper will explore portrayals

of the Mesolithic narrative.

**The ultimate post-excavation experience: fictionalising La Hougue Bie**

**Mark PATTON (The Open University)**

Not many archaeologists have gone on to write novels, and those who have (e.g. Francis Pryor’s The Lifers’ Club, Glyn Daniel’s The Cambridge Murders) have more often set their novels in the contemporary world of their own professional lives than in the past worlds that they have spent their lives studying.

My own project, as an archaeologist turned novelist, is a different one. I have now published three historical novels, all of which draw directly on the archaeological record, as well as on historical sources, basing my settings on excavated sites; and my characters, in some cases on historically documented people, and in other cases on archaeologically recorded burials.

Both my first novel, Undreamed Shores, and my third, Omphalos, draw directly on my own published archaeological research. Crafting them was, self-consciously, a literary, rather than an archaeological, undertaking, but I was also conscious of building on my earlier archaeological work and, in doing so, of posing questions, the answers to which were largely, or entirely inaccessible, to the archaeologist I had previously been. Some of these questions are posed by Margaret Elphinstone and Caroline Wickham-Jones (2012), in their exploration of “the blank spaces” and “forgotten stories” that lie between the “words of archaeological narrative.” What were people called? What did they eat for breakfast? What were their creation myths? Others suggested themselves as the stories unfolded. How might time have been divided up? How did prehistoric “exchange” actually function, on the level of conversations and relationships between individuals? What was the emotional landscape of people in the remote past?

In Omphalos, I returned to a specific archaeological site, La Hougue Bie, on the island of Jersey, which I had excavated and published as an archaeological monograph twenty years previously, in part to see what new questions might be posed, and what new insights might be gained by trying to tell the stories of individual people whose lives intersected at the site at various periods in time, from the 1940s back to the Early Neolithic. In this paper, I will explore the questions I was provoked to ask, and the ways in which I answered them, with reference both to the archaeological record which was changing, even as I was editing the novel) and to ethnographic analogy. If there is a sense that academic archaeologists working within “post-processual” and “phenomenological” traditions have taken the process of archaeological inference to its natural limits (and, perhaps further), there may also be a willingness to explore, more overtly, those aspects of the human past that are currently inaccessible to purely scientific inference. Mark Edmonds, for example, in his Ancestral Geographies of the Neolithic, includes fictional vignettes in what is otherwise a straightforward archaeological monograph; whilst Francis Pryor, in Home: a Time-traveller’s Tales from British Prehistory, remains on the ground of non-fiction, but delves into areas (e.g. the prehistory of the family) rarely reached by a “scientific” approach.

This may be an appropriate moment at which to review the ways in which different modes of imagining and writing about the past (scientific and imaginative, fictional and nonfictional) might develop in tandem, and in conversation with one another.

I draw directly

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relationships

excavated from

the 1940s

to the Early

Neolithic

with reference

to academic

traditions in

a Time-Traveller’s conversation.

**Ambiguity and omission: creative mediation of the unknowable past**

**Giacomo SAVANI (University of Leicester) and Victoria WHITWORTH (University of the Highlands and Islands)**

The role of the imagination in archaeology is foregrounded here by two scholars who are also both creative artists. This joint paper will bring together the fruits of their discussion about how to represent the unknown as well as the known in archaeological analysis and interpretation. Savani and Whitworth have been collaborating on an imaginative project combining creative writing, graphic art, material culture and landscape. This paper incorporates both creative work and reflective practice.

The role of the imagination

is to represent the unknown

**Consuming pasts: a storyteller’s take on taking**

**James GIBB (Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, Maryland, USA)**

Ruth Van Dyke and Reinhard Bernbeck provided 12 of my fellow contributors and me with the opportunity to explore alternative approaches to seeing the past in the publication earlier this year of Subjects and Narratives in Archaeology, building on Jameson, Ehrenhard and Finn’s 2003 edited volume, Ancient Muses: Archaeology in the Arts. Theory took a backseat in both publications, and questions remain, two of which I address in this session:

1. What is the ethical basis for using the lives and customs of past peoples?

2. And, how does one develop a dialogue from an imagined past?

I ask participants to come prepared to remember what they ate the previous evening and to contribute to the development of a few lines of theatrical dialogue.

building on theory

questions remain:

from

an imagined past.