

## CHAPTER 4

# LOOKING TO THE FUTURE OF MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY

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*A symposium entitled 'Looking to the Future' was held as part of the Society for Medieval Archaeology's 50th anniversary to reflect upon current and forthcoming issues facing the discipline. The discussion was wide-ranging, and is summarized here under the topics of the research potential of development-led fieldwork, the accessibility of grey literature, research frameworks for medieval archaeology, the intellectual health of the discipline, and relevance and outreach.*

### INTRODUCTION

Many of the events celebrating the 50th anniversary of the Society for Medieval Archaeology, and the resulting papers in this volume, look back over progress and past achievements. In contrast, the final workshop, 'Looking to the Future', held at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, on 3 May 2008, reflected upon the current problems and the way in which the subject might develop in the future. The event was not intended to agree a definite road-map for the future, even if such a thing were possible, a subject which was itself debated. Instead, it was designed to stimulate discussion on current questions and it succeeded in that respect. Contributions were made not only by the speakers who provided short introductions to the topics, but also by many of the people who attended and offered comments. There was much vigorous discussion also amongst the break-out groups which met to discuss the formal papers, and by individuals over lunch, during the coffee-breaks and in the reception afterwards. The participants came from across the archaeological profession and included those working in the contract sector, in museums, universities and the state bodies.

It is hardly possible in the present paper to reflect the range of views expressed at that meeting, although a number of themes did emerge very strongly and some degree of consensus was achieved on certain subjects during the course of discussion. It is these which are examined below. It is more than a convention to issue the usual warning that the comments reflect the opinions of the authors and are not necessarily the views of the Society as a whole. Indeed, they are not necessarily even the views

of the authors, but reflect their understanding of the mood of the meeting. What we have tried to capture are some of the concerns that were being expressed at the workshop and some possible ways ahead.

#### THE RESEARCH POTENTIAL OF DEVELOPMENT-LED FIELDWORK

One of the deep rifts which continues to run through the practice of archaeology is the division between academic study and research on the one hand, and contract or development-led survey and excavation on the other. This problem is, of course, not unique to the archaeology of the Middle Ages. There was a strong view at the meeting that this gap was not being bridged, but, if anything, was growing wider. This gulf has become accentuated with the professionalization of archaeology which began in the 1980s. As archaeological units moved from state or local authority support to commercial funding, the money which had been available for undertaking research was eroded. Developers could not be expected to support even those fundamental tasks which were necessary to archaeological research, such as the establishment of ceramic type-series. Intensified commercial competition between units has tended to drive up the efficiency of work in the field, but drive down the scope of the post-excavation process. A developer has an interest in removing the archaeological constraint on building, but most have little interest in the detail of post-excavation work. Planning Policy Guidance note 16 (PPG16) laid the foundations for commercial archaeology in England and established the principle that a developer must pay for the costs of dealing with any archaeological remains that will be damaged or destroyed. It is concerned primarily to ensure that remains are excavated and recorded. It makes little reference to the post-excavation process, referring only to 'a programme of archaeological work in accordance with a scheme of investigation' (Department of the Environment 1990, para 30). The consequence is, as one contributor to the discussion commented, that archaeological units often only regarded pottery as a means of dating: the character of the assemblage, what it might indicate, how it might have formed, and even the fabrics present, are of little concern.

At the heart of this problem are two competing views of archaeological fieldwork. It may be regarded as a routine site operation, comparable to laying a pipeline or constructing foundations. Such operations may, of course, run into problems when unexpected ground conditions are discovered during the works. Generally speaking, such work is straightforward and with proper preparation contractors can complete the work on time and to a budget to fulfil a specification. Archaeological contracting has increasingly adopted such an approach, since it has to be integrated into development project planning. This approach bears little resemblance to the alternative conception of archaeological work which exists, amongst other places, in universities. Excavation or survey is not viewed as a routine operation, but is intended to be an investigation of an original character into a new problem. The aims are fundamentally different. In the first, the central concern is the completion of the task according to a programme. In the second, the character of the task is constantly redefined as the excavation progresses and the only aim is to reveal new information.

A project design for the archaeological contractor is a statement of procedure. On a research excavation, it is a statement of the intellectual aims.

It is quite possible for these two approaches to exist in parallel, as they have done for many years. The excavation units have provided important data through development-led work, and this has allowed insights and the material for new syntheses, for the prehistoric and medieval periods (Bradley 2007; Gilchrist and Sloane 2005; Yates 2007). Yet there is a strong sense that the information obtained in this way is an incidental by-product of the archaeological contracting. It is not central to it. There is also a lurking fear that the information gathered is only a tiny fraction of the evidence which might be found by adopting rather different approaches. One archaeological contractor commented in a reply to a questionnaire sent by Naomi Sykes, 'We are a unit not a research facility — developers don't like to pay, they just want their site cleared of archaeology and to comply with the law'.

This problem, how to add a research-value to development-led fieldwork, is one of the major challenges of our discipline. We should be clear that there is no implicit criticism of archaeological units which are on the whole performing their role very efficiently. The question is whether society should expect developers to pay for units to behave rather more like research facilities. If we decide that this is an unreasonable demand, then we must question why are we asking them to pay for any excavation? Excavation is, or at least it should be, research or it is nothing. It is a particularly pressing question for the Middle Ages, more so even than for the prehistoric and Roman archaeology, because of the quantity of development-led work carried out in still-occupied settlements — both urban and rural — which commonly had medieval antecedents.

#### STANDARDS, ACCESSIBILITY AND GREY LITERATURE

One crucial result of the expansion in development-led archaeology has been an increase in the amount of fieldwork, and the number of resulting reports. Some projects are seen through to full publication in reports ranging from major monographs to short notes in county-based journals, with the comprehensive archives deposited in museums. In many cases, however, the results of development-led projects are not published. All that is produced is a typescript report placed in the historic environment record. There is now a very considerable body of this so-called 'grey literature' and initiatives such as OASIS: *Online AccesS to the Index of archaeological investigationS* (<http://oasis.ac.uk>) are beginning to make these reports more accessible to field units and academics alike. We also have a summary list of all archaeological work undertaken from the Archaeological Investigations Project (<http://cswb.bournemouth.ac.uk/aip/aipintro.htm>). As a profession, however, we have yet to realize the full research potential of this data in the form of synthesis. Much of the data preserved only as grey literature relates to relatively small-scale fieldwork, but cumulatively this has huge potential for research. Even small, unstratified assemblages of material in sufficient numbers can start to shed light on the origins and development of currently occupied medieval settlements.

Concerns were also expressed in the London meeting about the quality of some grey literature, and there is clearly a need for national standards in the content and presentation of reports. Indeed, the matter of standards in professional archaeology was a subject that came up in discussion on several occasions in relation to all stages of development-led work, including the involvement of specialists from the design stage of a project through to its completion, developing approaches for sampling topsoil before it is machined off (including metal-detecting), having a consistent strategy for sieving stratified deposits for both artefacts and palaeo-environmental material, and the quality of reports. There is clearly a role here for specialist groups such as the Medieval Pottery Research Group, who have published their *Minimum Standards for the Processing, Recording, Analysis and Publication of Post-Roman Ceramics* (<http://www.medievalpottery.org.uk/occpap2.htm>), although national bodies such as the Institute for Field Archaeologists, the Association of Local Government Archaeological Officers (ALGAO), and Cadw, English Heritage, Historic Scotland, and in Ireland, the National Monuments Service and the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland, also need to take a lead.

#### RESEARCH FRAMEWORKS

Many research frameworks have been produced in the past by archaeologists in Britain, each seeking to establish an agenda for future study of aspects of the discipline. One recent example is the Medieval Settlement Research Group's policy statement that 'sets out a research and management framework for medieval rural settlement and landscape' (<http://www.britarch.ac.uk/msrg/msrgpolicy.htm>). English Heritage has recently embarked upon a series of regional research frameworks that comprise a 'resource assessment', summarizing our current state of knowledge, and a 'research agenda' to guide future work (<http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/upload/pdf/frameworks.pdf>). Most of these regional surveys are now published in various forms (eg <http://www.somerset.gov.uk/somerset/cultureheritage/heritage/swarf/publications/>). In addition to research frameworks with a geographical emphasis, other examples have a period focus, such as the Prehistoric Society's *Research Frameworks for the Palaeolithic and Mesolithic of Britain and Ireland*. The question of whether medieval archaeology should have such a research strategy was discussed at the London meeting.

There are potentially many benefits to such a project, including the improvement of dialogue between the different sectors of modern archaeology (universities, national government bodies, local authority curatorial staff, field units), the provision of a better rationale for the archaeological work required as part of PPG 16, and the targeting of resources, for example, through doctoral projects and university research. The Society for Medieval Archaeology did attempt a somewhat similar initiative in the mid-1980s when it made recommendations to HBMC, as English Heritage was then known, about priorities and policies for the allocation of grants (Society for Medieval Archaeology 1987). At that time the Society held back from making a more general statement about research priorities and 20 years later the task of agreeing such a thing for medieval archaeology seems even more formidable.

In the last two decades medieval archaeology has greatly expanded its means of investigation and its subjects of study. In addition to the traditional buried or 'dirt' archaeology with which we are all familiar, research resources include documentary and cartographic sources, field- and place-names, and the physical fabric of the historic environment: standing buildings, field boundaries, woodland and so on. Collectively, these form the historic environment. In the 1980s there was little consideration of the questions of gender or of the investigation of perception. Our appreciation of the role of artefacts as symbols has subsequently developed and we regard landscapes in an entirely different way (see papers by Gilchrist, Gerrard, Reynolds and Rippon, this volume). The lateral growth of the scope of medieval archaeology makes it difficult to agree a list of research issues. As a result, there is a very real danger that any such list will reflect the personal enthusiasms of the compilers and command little wider support. Other issues to consider include how to keep research frameworks up-to-date — something that is out-of-date could do more damage than good? — and how to encompass the potentially diverse stakeholders, which might include academics, the curatorial sector, field units, and local communities, in a research strategy project.

It is easier to compile a research agenda for specific sites, areas or problems than to create such a thing for a broad subject such as medieval archaeology as a whole. A narrow research agenda is also likely to be more effective because focused research plans stand a better chance of being realized than airy aspirations. Historic Scotland, for example, has adopted the narrower approach with the creation of research plans for the conservation management and display of individual monuments in care. These identify gaps in understanding, aim to publish the results of backlog project work on the sites, and create programmes for new intervention and recording. In this respect the research agendas for the Scottish properties in care resemble those for World Heritage Sites (WHS) which are increasingly linked to research programmes. Research plays an initial role in the presentation of the case for inscribing a site on the World Heritage List through the establishment of authenticity and integrity. UNESCO also requires that the state of each WHS is monitored to prevent deterioration, something which can only be determined through a study of their baseline condition. Finally, the management guidelines suggest that research should be included in the site management plans of each WHS (Darvill 2007). Specific research programmes linked with sites or small areas are likely to bring real rewards in extending understanding.

In Ireland the approach has been rather different. Instead of establishing a research agenda for contract archaeology, which has expanded massively in the last decade, the Heritage Council has offered substantial grants to synthesize the data produced. The grant scheme known as INSTAR encourages cooperation between archaeological companies, the state sector and higher education, and aims to translate the results of development-led work into 'knowledge about Ireland's past'. Although a number of themes have been identified, the grant scheme is essentially open to proposals for research. This scheme does not set an agenda and is a 'downstream' or post-hoc approach to research. It draws together the results of excavation, rather than informing the process of digging or decisions about what should be dug.

## THE INTELLECTUAL HEALTH OF THE DISCIPLINE

The impact of theoretical approaches has been considerably less far-reaching in the archaeology of the Middle Ages than in prehistory. This has been a cause of disquiet for those who have argued for a more theoretically aware approach to the medieval period (see Gilchrist, this volume). Theoretical developments in the humanities have sometimes been assimilated into our subject in an implicit rather than explicit manner. Matthew Johnson made the point at the London meeting that there was no such thing as a-theoretical archaeology. All archaeology has a theoretical stance, even if that position is taken for granted rather than explicit. His concern was that familiarity with the subject breeds an acceptance of the terms of the debate, rather than a critical re-examination of them. We do not consider our position in relationship to the material we are studying, but take it as read. Johnson contrasted the more abstract formulations of early medieval archaeology with the more material subjects which are studied by later medievalists (Figure 4.1). Put simply, the later Middle Ages seems much more familiar to us, while the pagan world of peoples in the 5th and 6th century does not. Questioning the basis of what we take for granted may yield new insights. The difference in perspectives on the early and later medieval periods, however, is not just a product of our familiarity or our desire to examine the basis of our knowledge, but is also the result of a greater abundance of written evidence. We are able to move beyond simple abstractions to deal with the details of people's lives in the 14th and 15th centuries in a way that is not possible in earlier periods.

The relationship between archaeological and written evidence still remains a source of some concern, to judge from the discussion in London. A number of contributors expressed an uncertainty about the role of material culture in the study of a period for which there are also numerous documents. This seemed to be a curious return to the fear expressed in the 1970s that archaeology was merely there to provide illustrative material to a narrative which was being written by historians. Strangely enough, this does not seem to be a significant concern for post-medieval archaeologists who are working within a period when there is an even greater quantity of written evidence. They have embraced the alternative perspectives provided by material culture to present views which may examine aspects of the past not revealed by written sources, and even to challenge the documentary record (see, for example,

Early Medieval Archaeology	Later Medieval Archaeology
Race	Church
People	Village
Tribe	Field
Migration	Castle
Invasion	Landscape

FIGURE 4.1. Contrasting subject matter in early and later medieval archaeology (after Matthew Johnson).

various papers in Tarlow and West 1999). Of course, some medieval archaeologists have done exactly the same, and the academic skirmishes which have become known as ‘the Battle for Bodiam’ exemplify this point (Goodall 1988; see also Hansson, this volume). The argument has been not just about whether Bodiam was simply a military structure. It also concerns how far we can accept at face value the written statement in the Patent Rolls of the purpose and intentions of Sir Edward Dallingridge, the builder of the castle. The rolls state that the castle was licensed to be built as a defence against the French. Archaeological opinion has largely accepted that the building had a strongly symbolic purpose. There is still much fight left in the defenders of the older view that it was a primarily a defensive building, as the latest contribution to the affray indicates, but most have concluded that the Battle for Bodiam has been won and have moved on to consider other fortifications (Platt 2006).

Bodiam Castle is an instance in which medieval archaeology has set the agenda, not merely followed that provided by historians. The recent study of castles has opened up new perspectives on elite culture, so that it has become necessary to look afresh at the symbols by which the gentry and nobility sought to display their status. The subject of dining, for example, has benefited from studies of the spaces in which it took place and the rituals of meals, as well as the types of food consumed (Brears 2008; Sykes 2004). In this area, it has not been a matter of contrasting the material and written sources of evidence, but of combining them to provide a deeper understanding of the social role and symbolism of food and eating (see also papers by Müldner and Sykes, this volume). Archaeology and history are not competing to provide an interpretation of the past, but should be seen as offering alternative and preferably complementary routes to it.

The problem of fitting archaeology into the wider agenda was highlighted by a number of contributors at the London meeting, particularly those working in commercial archaeology. The difficulties of moving beyond the business of excavation to the wider study of archaeology have already been discussed. The problem of integrating knowledge about the past into a wider synthesis is even bigger still. Terry O’Connor has noted that ‘historians have continued to write as if for other historians, and . . . there is little indication that the archaeologists will hasten to cross (let alone demolish) the disciplinary fence . . . There is a sense of two cultures talking together, but not necessarily *to* each other’ (quoted at the London meeting by Naomi Sykes, from O’Connor 2008). Very few would now advocate that we should practise medieval archaeology as if it was the study of a period without documents, forging a view of the past which was independent of history and ignored written sources entirely. Our view of, for example, the late medieval landscape is infinitely more detailed than is possible for any prehistoric period. Not only do we have an abundance of surviving remains, but also written evidence, later maps, place-names and even folklore to draw upon in understanding the landscape of the past (on folklore, see Franklin 2006; Phythian-Adams 1999). The sheer quantity of the evidence is actually part of the problem. It is often hard to see how archaeology fits into this immensely complex picture and be sure that we not only know about evidence from other disciplines, but understand its limitations. We are asking medieval archaeologists to be experts in their own field, and also to have more than a passing acquaintance with

numerous other disciplines. Few other subjects make such a demand upon their practitioners, and it is hardly surprising that we often are reluctant to demolish those disciplinary fences.

During the course of her presentation in London, Naomi Sykes noted that the application of scientific investigation is less common for the later medieval period than the early Middle Ages, and *much* less common for the medieval period than prehistory. The assumption seems to be that, for periods in which written sources are more abundant, scientific analysis can contribute little. This cannot be correct. Although we have written evidence for the European trade in stockfish in the late Middle Ages, for example, this does not mean that isotopic sourcing of the catch-sites of the fish is superfluous and can contribute no new information (Barrett *et al* 2008). Equally, we have a better understanding of the problems, particularly the difficulties of communication, which may have led to the sinking of the *Mary Rose* now that isotopic studies have demonstrated that a third or a half of the crew were of foreign origin (Bell *et al* 2008). This observation augments our knowledge of the tragedy and helps us to interpret the historical record anew. These examples are chosen from some of the more recently published work.

It is difficult to take a dispassionate view of the intellectual health of the medieval archaeology. Measured in one way, there are considerable grounds for optimism. There is an almost overwhelming stream of articles and books about the medieval period. The reading lists which we give to our undergraduate students bear very little resemblance to those which we received when we first studied the subject. There are numerous signs that there is immense activity in almost all branches of the subject. Yet, in spite of this, there are some nagging doubts that all is not entirely rosy. Too often the contributions have been made by individuals who are working entirely on their own in the pursuit of a particular subject of research. We lack the size of community to ensure that there are a number of researchers applying themselves to the same or similar problems and willing to debate interpretations. The Battle for Bodiam is one of a fairly small number of examples of a subject which has been fiercely, though constructively, contested. Understanding does not only advance in that way, of course, but critical engagement is a sure sign of the intellectual liveliness of a subject area. There is a concern too that medieval archaeology may be splintering into separate areas — artefacts, landscapes, religion — each with its own pre-occupations aired in their specialist journals, and that the subject lacks a coherent vision of the past as a whole.

Finally, there is the problem that we began with. It is entirely unsatisfactory for the subject to be divided into those who gather evidence (the contract archaeologists) and those who analyse it (generally, the university archaeologists). The process of excavation is not neutral activity of observation and recording; it is an active engagement with soils and walls. Excavation is informed by our assumptions and what we expect. We record what seems significant: interpretation takes place at the trowel's edge, to use Ian Hodder's term (Hodder 1999, 92). The idea that we will gather the information now and interpret it at some time in the future is unrealistic. Of course, it is possible to reinterpret excavation records, but too often the things we



wish had been examined have remained unconsidered and unrecorded. It may seem unrealistic to say this in the world of competitive tendering, but should not all excavation be committed to the wider enterprise of understanding the past?

#### RELEVANCE AND OUTREACH

Many of the topics discussed above touch upon the central issue of relevance and accessibility, including the need to make the results of archaeological research in the medieval period relevant to scholars working with other source material and in other disciplines. With large sums of public and private money now spent on studying medieval archaeology we have a responsibility to make the results of our research available to as wide an audience as possible. In part, this means publishing the results of fieldwork through a variety of media and for a number of audiences in different forms, ranging from scholarly monographs through to popular booklets and websites. Museums have been fulfilling part of this role by providing the interface between people and the past for several centuries through traditional galleries containing artefacts, and more recently by means of open-air museums containing vernacular buildings. The presentation of archaeological sites that are accessible to the public is another way that we can reach out to the public. Some rural sites may be seen without requesting prior permission because they are in the ownership of a local authority or the National Trust, and others because they are crossed by a public footpath or are in areas in England and Wales covered by the 'right to roam' under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act (Dyer 1989, 1990). However, archaeological earthworks are not readily comprehensible to the non-specialist and information panels may be a useful aid to interpretation. Presenting complex information derived from a multi-disciplinary subject, such as archaeology, is in itself a specialist task that has to take into account factors such as the National Curriculum for schools, access for those with difficulties with mobility, and social agendas such as social inclusion. As such, museums will continue to be at the forefront of making research into medieval archaeology relevant.

Like any academic discipline, one of the most important ways that we can reach out to the wider public is through involving them in practical work, but in recent decades this has proved very difficult to do within the context of development-led work, such are the constraints of tight schedules, health and safety, and insurance concerns. University-led research projects have more scope for involving members of the local community although these will always be relatively few in number, and may involve considerable travel time and cost. There are, however, other ways that professional archaeology can promote community involvement, of which Carenza Lewis's Higher Education Field Academies are a fine example. The HEFA involves digging small test-pits within the gardens and other open spaces of rural villages and hamlets, a straightforward task that is ideal for people with no previous experience. Each 1m square pit is dug in 10cm layers, the spoil is sieved for finds and tested for geochemical indicators of historic occupation, and the details of each layer are recorded. In addition to introducing 14- to 15-year-old pupils to archaeology, and increasing their confidence and aspirations to continue in education, the results of

20 or so test-pits in an average-sized village can reveal important information about these currently occupied medieval settlements, within which archaeological research is otherwise rarely carried out (Lewis 2007).

#### CONCLUSION

This summary has sought to reflect the mood of the London meeting which was quietly reflective rather than celebratory of the 50 years of achievement. Delegates to the symposium were cautious about the future. Uncertainties about funding and employment in the commercial sector and in museums, together with crises in the teaching of archaeology and funding of research in universities, produced a sombre and reflective air. The sense of excitement and even confidence which had accompanied first the discovery and later the publication of such remarkable sites as Sutton Hoo, Yeavinger and Cheddar palace seemed to belong to a different era. There was a sense of considerable uncertainty about directions in which medieval archaeology might develop. It is not clear whether the allegiances of medieval archaeology should belong to a study of the past represented by history and historical geography, or to the broader social sciences and their concern with critical theory.

Yet this tentative view of the subject reflected at the London meeting seems remarkably distant from the perception held by the wider public, who see archaeology as an exciting and vibrant discipline. Medieval archaeology, in particular, is perceived as dealing with interesting and relevant subjects, including Vikings, castles and parish churches. There is a very strong desire among the public to know about and make sense of the remains of the past which they can see around them, a desire which stems from a need to understand their position in the present. Reflecting upon the last 50 years of medieval archaeology should also encourage us to look more positively to the future. There has never been a Golden Age when there were sufficient funds for all the work we wanted to do. Archaeologists have muddled through and, in spite of all the problems and obstacles, it has been a most remarkable half-century of discovery. Is there any real reason to think that the next 50 years will not be quite as extraordinary?

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