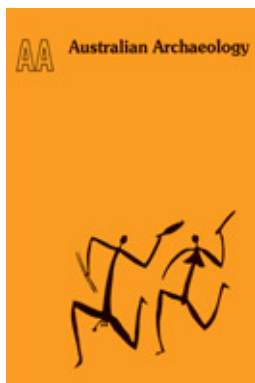


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ARCHAEOLOGY IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

On the face of it archaeology should be the least politically sensitive of academic activities. It is, after all, a subject devoted to the study of the rise of man and his works, throughout the world, from the earliest beginnings up to yesterday, and as such it has no commitment to colour, creed or nationality. The fact is, however, that it has incurred its measure of suspicion, in Australia and overseas.

I

The discipline is a product of the intellectual movement in 19th century Europe and followed the flag of European imperialism into every quarter of the globe. The fundamental work on the archaeology of Egypt, India, even China, was done by Europeans, and schools of teaching and research grew up in Europe devoted to the study of the history and cultures of every other part of the world. In the course of their activity, material artifacts of dead and living societies were removed in their thousands for lodgement and study in European libraries and museums.

Reaction against colonialism in the present century has meant restriction on the practice of the academic pursuits associated with it. The new nations of Africa and Asia tightly control the conditions under which foreign research teams, archaeological and other, operate in their countries and export their discoveries out of them. Some of the most stringent conditions on foreign archaeological activity are indeed laid down by countries like Greece and Turkey with no direct experience of European colonialism, yet which have long been the object of active academic interest by wealthier nations, because of the spectacular nature of their archaeological remains and their particular place in the genesis of European civilisation. There can, of course, be few countries in the world today without antiquities legislation of some kind to prohibit or control the export of what is called national cultural property, particularly at a time when the price of such items on the international market is enormous.

It is often forgotten, however, how important the role of European institutions has been in collecting and preserving manuscripts and artifacts from other cultures that would undoubtedly have otherwise been lost. Indeed it is largely due to European scholarship that the world now puts a value on these things. But while the European scholar abroad has been, as he saw it, dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, others have seen him as involved in an exercise which benefitted only himself and his colleagues. A major condition upon overseas scientific

research in Asian and Pacific countries nowadays is feedback from the scholar to the host country at both national and local levels, by his explaining the nature and value of his work before it starts, training nationals as it proceeds and communicating its results when it is finished.

It seems likely that the suspicions that have been voiced by Aborigines about anthropological research in Australia in general and archaeological research in particular are partly the result of lack of such communication between students of Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal communities. But in Australia, and also in countries like the United States and Canada, the problem is a deeper one, for it involves the feelings of an indigenous population whose culture has been swamped by the permanent settlement of alien intruders and which has for long been a forgotten minority in its own land. It was inevitable that when the reaction against this situation set in, the alien scholars of the indigenous culture should be amongst the prime targets for criticism by the erstwhile objects of their study.

It is true that individual scholars have established the closest of relations with Aboriginal communities with whom they have worked and that research has become a co-operative and mutually beneficial activity. Particularly in the more populated areas of Australia, however, where Aboriginal communities are less noticeable or, perhaps more truthfully, have not been sought out, such relationships exist rarely if at all. Now that Aborigines have set up their own organisations to voice their grievances and aspirations, the opportunity clearly exists for us to explain what, as archaeologists in Australia, we are trying to do and why.

II

One of the major strengths of archaeology is its ability to demonstrate common themes in the history of mankind and at the same time describe the unique experience of different peoples in it.

In a short history, 150 years in some parts of the world, like Europe, much less in others, like Australia and the Pacific, its discoveries have shown how, equipped with culture, man inherited the earth, spreading from a tropical homeland first by land, hundreds of thousands of years ago, across the continental landmasses of Africa and Eurasia, later, tens of thousands of years ago, over ice to the Americas and over sea to the then united continental island of Australia and New Guinea. These considerable achievements, which involved the mastery of virtually all known habitable environments, were made by stone-using people in small scale societies living by women's gathering of wild foods and man's hunting of wild animals. This type of economy, which was that of the Aborigines until it was wholly or partially destroyed by the European takeover of Australia, is a common experience in the history of all human societies. In a

timescale for man now to be reckoned in perhaps three million years, the first break with this tradition came a mere 10,000 years ago with the development and subsequent spread of agriculture. This in time and in places led from 5000 years ago to the rise of large scale societies equipped with writing and organised in cities and states. Industrial societies such as we know today are of very recent growth, within the last thousand years.

Archaeology has not only provided a timetable of these developments, by which they can be seen in perspective; it has shown how none of them was the work of a single people or a single part of the world; how discoveries like agriculture were made independently and in different forms in many places; how unique inventions like the wheel were taken over, adapted and improved by other peoples; and how the legacy which our modern society has inherited from the past is from all ages and all parts of the world.

In the population and environmental crisis of our present times, however, the development of large scale industrialising societies that are typical of some parts of the world and have been aggressively exported by them to others is no longer seen as an unmixed blessing by its main beneficiaries, let alone its victims. In reaction there has been a growing interest in alternative forms of human experience in living. Archaeology is making its own contribution to the debate by a study of the circumstances in which some societies maintained an effective balance between their populations and the environment that provided their resources, while others took the path of economic and social expansion and environmental transformation. Australian Aboriginal society is of great interest in this respect, since from the archaeological evidence now being won it maintained an enviable stability over perhaps 50,000 years.

The excitement of its discoveries, and their humanistic appeal, have won for archaeology a following amongst the general public unequalled amongst the academic disciplines, not only as readers of books and viewers of films, but also participating in research on archaeological excavations. Because it deals with the entire span of human history, new nations in Africa and Asia, with little written history or one deriving wholly from their experience under European colonialism, have strongly encouraged its practice, since it provides them with a focus of proper pride in the achievements of forefathers of their own. As archaeology develops in Australia, and it is still an infant here, it has the potential to make a similar contribution to the character of this country. For the Aboriginal Australian it can recover the hidden information for a history of his people; it has already made dramatic and unexpected discoveries important not only for the history of the Aborigines but for the history of mankind at large. It can guide the European Australian

to an appreciation of a long lasting way of life different from his own, which was successfully practised even in the harshest parts of the continent, was broken only by force and still maintains an identity in the modern world. For both groups, co-citizens as they are, it can help to foster a joint pride in the unique past of the particular part of the world where both now live.

This is a large aim and will not have been achieved until Aboriginal scholars are working on the archaeology of Australia and of other parts of the world as well. The first steps must be modest, since we have to overcome not only lack of knowledge of our aims, but suspicion of our activities. This seems to involve two things: seizing every opportunity to explain our work to Aborigines, and undertaking the responsibility of discussing projects we wish to initiate with appropriate Aboriginal groups. We may well find that because of the temper of the times some projects are not negotiable. It will be a measure of our success when such areas of disagreement disappear.

Jack Golson

ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND ABORIGINES

Some thoughts following the AAA Symposium at ANZAAS 1975

The problems that have already arisen, and are likely to occur even more in future, regarding Aboriginal hostility to archaeological work in Australia seem to be due mainly to lack of public understanding of what archaeology is all about. For this archaeologists themselves are chiefly to blame, because of their general disinclination or inability to communicate in a popular way. In comparison with the Australian situation one might consider the enormous popularity of an interest in archaeology in Great Britain, which is considerably due to popular archaeological publications and TV series, leading to wide public support for the excavation and preservation of archaeological sites. One reason for the avoidance of the popular media by archaeologists in Australia is probably fear of interference and vandalism and, latterly, of Aboriginal political exploitation.

However, it was made clear at the AAA Symposium that Aborigines, both country and urban, feel very strongly and genuinely opposed to desecration of burial sites of their ancestors, regardless of any specific local connotations. This is not just a political ploy; it is an emotive issue that can