



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Images of the Past: illustrating and imaging archaeology

Citation for published version:

Thomas, G 2009, 'Images of the Past: illustrating and imaging archaeology' euroREA, vol 6, pp. 8-12.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Publisher final version (usually the publisher pdf)

Published In:

euroREA

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Images of the Past: illustrating and imagining archaeology

This article concentrates on two aspects of presenting archaeology by creating images of the past: reconstruction drawings and the construction of experimental replica buildings. Can pure objectivity be achieved?

■ Gordon THOMAS
(UK)

There is one aspect of archaeology which is only rarely considered but which is increasingly becoming an integral rather than a subsidiary part of the way we present archaeology to ourselves and to the rest of the world- and that is the way in which we use images. Despite a long and honourable tradition, there are, I believe, still many academic prejudic-

es against aspects of archaeological illustration especially when it comes to reconstruction drawings. It is generally thought that their artistic nature proscribes any possibility of the drawings being in any way scientific and that they are, therefore, not subject to the same intellectual or academic rigours as other modes of presentation – particularly the written word. I hope to be able to explore this theme a bit more deeply and, perhaps, indicate how current research into the theory of archaeological illustration has moved forward and has now placed it more firmly at the core of both archaeological interpretation and communication. To do this I would like to concentrate on two main aspects of the creation of images of the past and these are: the creation of re-

construction drawings and the construction of experimental replicas of buildings.

*I hear and I forget
I see and I remember
I do and I understand.*
(Anonymous Proverb)

I have often used this anonymous quotation to emphasise the importance in the learning process of visual representation and how it can be used to reinforce the written or spoken word. My own experience with archaeological illustration has shown me just how persuasive the visual image can be and how the form of our imaginings about the past are not always dictated by the archaeological evidence no matter how hard we strive for objectivity. The first line of this proverb; **I hear and I forget**,

reminds me as a lecturer how acutely aware I am that most people will hear what is said but will forget most of the information from it. The second line of the proverb; **I see and I remember**, highlights why we frequently use learning aids such as handouts in lectures and it is why the increasing use of on-line teaching material has become so popular with universities. Students will see the lecture and the images that are used in it and they will remember more of the lecture. However, it is in the actual doing that an understanding of the material is achieved. This applies to the doing of a drawing as much as it does the actual doing of another activity. By creating an image we are forced to make choices and decisions about the evidence- we are forced to interpret it.

The drawn image, if used dishonestly, can be very persuasive in luring us into a comfortable acceptance of one interpretation over another by giving an authority or finality to an interpretation which the written word cannot, necessarily, do. So often we see reconstruction drawings which invite us to make comparisons or to see patterns in the evidence without being specific about the sources of evidence. We must understand how and why this can happen if we are to use images correctly in our publications. The final line of this proverb; **I do and I understand**, also serves as a reminder of the importance of the *experiential* side of archaeological research- that personal, almost phenomenological, engagement with sites, landscapes and technologies in promoting our understanding or interpretation of the past. In the case of my own research it is the experience of past technologies and structures through the experimental process that can lead to a greater understanding or knowing of the past.

Between the drawing and the experimental replica I see a continuous line of development with increasing levels of certainty being evident and an increasing range of data being employed in the interpretation. They are both doing the same thing and it will be interesting to examine some of the common themes which influence their creation. My interest in the topic of archaeological drawing is long standing having grappled in the past with the needs and demands of many different projects and archaeologists. To a very large extent, this has been informed by the traditions of archaeological illustration which have been developed by the work of people like General Pitt-Rivers, Sir Mortimer Wheeler and, of course, Prof Stuart Piggott all of whose work still stands today as models of best practice and professional standards. The canons and conventions of archaeologi-

cal illustration established by these antiquarians or prehistorians still stand true today. These are not really in question. It is with the issue of interpretation rather than method that the problems arise. As can be seen here (**fig.1**), many of the conventions and techniques used by Piggott in reconstruction drawings remain unchanged to this day. The angle of observation, the intellectual distance from the subject, the use of atmospheric shading, the cutaway view etc are all still the same.

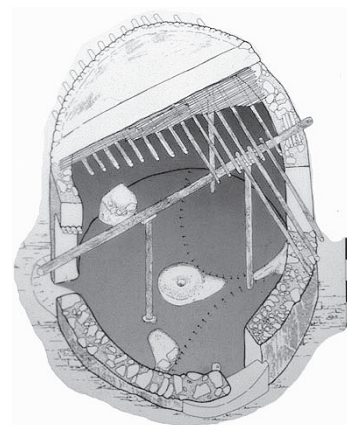
The second strand I would like to incorporate into my consideration of archaeological images is that of experimental archaeology. Again this is an area of research that has been a feature of archaeology at Edinburgh for a number of years going back to Gordon Childe's experiments with vitrification in 1937-38 (Childe 1938). More recently, since the 1970s, a number of projects in experimental archaeology have featured in the research profile of archaeology at Edinburgh – the Scottish Crannog Centre on Loch Tay and my own work at the Lemba Experimental Village in Cyprus being the most prominent of them (Thomas 2005) (**fig. 2**).

"The tyranny of representation"

Both the reconstruction drawing and the experimental replica building are part of the same process of interpreting the past through the visual media. They are two faces of the same way in which we use visual and symbolic representations in both the construction and the presentation of knowledge. Crucially, they have as much to do with art and social theory as they have to do with archaeological interpretation. Both are visual images; one, the archaeological drawing, is the two dimensional picture and the other, the replica building, is the three dimensional sculpture. How we approach them

though, even as archaeologists, is not necessarily from an archaeological standpoint. John-Gordon Swogger, an illustrator associated with the Çatalhöyük project, (Swogger 2000) has stressed one aspect of archaeological images that is important in this context and that is what he calls "...the tyranny of representation...". By this he means the pervasive and persuasive power that images have in reinforcing stereotypes or preconceptions about certain aspects of the past. Images can act as media of both creative discourse and of the control of knowledge. But, they are frequently created after the discussions are over and are the result of static, fossilised archaeological thoughts that can neither adapt nor fade away. Brian Molyneux refers to this as the inertia of pictures (Molyneux 1997, 6). The many excellent, atmospheric images created by Alan Sorrell which are used to illustrate so many aspects of past British history are such a case in point. Although Sorrell worked closely with many archaeologists, his drawings were often presented as a finished interpretation and it was not until the retrospective publication by his younger son Mark Sorrell (1981) that it was possible to gain an insight into the workings of his creative process and to be able to deconstruct and analyse the images as documents more effectively.

Brian Molyneux in his publication **The Cultural Life of**



■ **Fig. 1** Axonometric reconstruction drawing of building B200 at Kissonerga Mylouthkia, Cyprus viewed from the south. Image from: Thomas 2005 fig. 6.2, p. 106.

Images (1997, 2) describes how "images become arresting because they are phrased in the language of the visual, a language which is ascribed a greater degree of immediacy, comprehensibility and believability than the Western, particularly the scientific, tradition". He sees images as being central to the way in which knowledge is both constructed and expressed to the extent that concepts, even within the pure sciences, are restricted in the absence of visualisation (Molyneux 1997, 6). If images can be so fundamental to the workings of science then it is also important that we too understand what we are actually doing when we create these images of the past and that we understand how images are used by those with whom



■ **Fig. 2** General view of the Lemba Experimental Village, Cyprus from the south. Image from: Thomas 2005 fig. 1.3, p. 11.

we are in dialogue. Swogger considers that visual representations are approached through what he calls, three windows, each of which will frame the viewers approach in a particular way. These are:

- 1) **style** or the media employed,
- 2) **content**; the archaeological information embedded in the image and
- 3) **presentation**; the manner in which the image and its content are set before the viewer. The importance and significance of each window depends partly on the knowledge, background and taste of each viewer and partly on the choices made by the illustrator.

Parallel processes of interpretation and understanding

Colin Renfrew in his recent publication **Figuring it Out** drew an “*analogy between the position of the observer who sees works of art for the first time, and that of the archaeologist who has excavated assemblages of artefacts from the past ...*” (2003, 20). Both are dealing with the material world that other people have made and both have to make for themselves some sense out of it. In each case, Renfrew considers that the task is the same and the process that each goes through in making sense of what is before them is very similar in fact. He sees two parallel processes in operation. I would go further and say that the process of creating archaeological reconstruction drawings and experimental replica buildings are themselves also, fundamentally, artistic processes. So, we effectively have three parallel processes: the archaeological artist (and I include here both the archaeological illustrator and the experimental builder), the archaeologist excavating a site and the art viewer all of whom bring to their understanding of material culture the same sort of cognitive processes.

These, rather ill-defined, processes of creation and interpretation do not appear in a vacuum. They are conditioned and moulded by several factors. These are:

- 1) the archaeological evidence itself,
- 2) the cultural background of the participant and
- 3) the creative and imaginative abilities of the participant.

I do not intend here to get into a debate about the nature and meaning of archaeological evidence. There are many statements in the literature about post-processual or interpretive archaeology which alert us to the way in which archaeological knowledge is itself constructed and how we come to view all archaeological material with certain pre-understandings which condition the way we use and interpret them. Suffice it to say that in the creation of reconstruction drawings and experimental replicas these limitations or influences do also have an impact. However, I suspect that many archaeologists believe that archaeological data and their interpretation of that data are the only major inputs into the process of creating drawings and replicas. This is not the case as I will argue.

The cultural background of the participant (the illustrator or experimental builder as well as the viewer) includes the influences upon and considerations of their perceptions and prejudices. This goes beyond the experiences of the individual and also encompasses aspects of our collective imperial pasts and national identities. For example, how far have our interpretations of British Iron Age structures been influenced by the observation of similar circular timber and mud buildings in parts of Imperial British Africa? (fig. 3) In this respect, we in Britain should also consider our own historical or folk traditions which draw on our sometimes, myth-

ic, Celtic past. On a recent trip to a conference on experimental archaeology on continental Europe we visited several sites where experimental archaeology was the main focus of activity. I was impressed by the atmosphere of several experimental reconstructions which presented very powerful evocations of a past with a distinct ethnic atmosphere. Although academic rigour and sound archaeological evidence is clearly being used in the creation of such buildings and sites it is also quite clear that issues of national identity played an important part in their presentation. I suspect, that in the case of archaeological open air museums there is a considerable unspoken cultural influence being brought to bear on the way these great pieces of archaeological sculpture are both created and presented. But what of the Near Eastern experience where most of the illustrators and experimental builders come from a separate cultural tradition- usually European? Does this dislocation result in a substantially different approach to the portrayal of the past or do we still seek clues and validation in the recent past of these areas (fig. 1)? From my own experience I would say that we cannot be immune to these influences and that even in an environment which can be to us alien, we are still shaped by that environment and we still draw upon it for our inspiration.

Structured understanding through style and presentation

This brings me to the last of Swogger’s three windows and these are the creative or artistic influences on the illustrator and experimental builder. These are both creative processes and, despite any academic input, they can still very largely be *ad hoc* creations. The process of doing a drawing or building a structure is an evolving or devel-

opmental experience in that the final form of the creation is not necessarily pre-determined or predicted. Many external influences can come to bear upon the artist-craftsman at the point of creating the drawing or the structure. It can be, fundamentally, an emotional and psychological process which leads to the creation of style. No two illustrators create the same image just as no two experimental builders create the same structure. Each has its own distinctive character and each can influence the viewers’ perception of the creation and their understanding of it. However, are these influences necessarily bad or are they necessarily anti-scientific as opposed to non-scientific? There is now a considerable body of opinion which says not and which values such influences for their honesty and contribution. So, do we continue to strive for pure objectivity in our reconstruction drawings and buildings or, are we going to be honest accepting a multiplicity of interpretations and allowing our drawings and buildings to show it? The route of objectivity is not sterile but maybe, on its own, does not necessarily take forward the case for academic rigour nor address the issues of transparency of interpretation.

There are already good examples in the literature on how a certain degree of objectivity can be maintained with both drawings and structural replicas These include:

- 1) providing drawings with cutaways, distant angled views, architectural detail,
- 2) not completing experimental buildings and leaving elements of the structure accessible for inspection,
- 3) making it clear that the structure is research in process and is but one possible interpretation and
- 4) avoiding dressing up structures and sites to give a comfortable evocation of the past.



■ **Fig. 3** The great Roundhouse at The Butser Experimental Farm, Hampshire, England. Photo: the author.



■ **Fig. 4** The Scottish Crannog Centre, Loch Tay, Scotland. Photo: the author.

All these devices are designed to make the viewer feel less at ease with the drawing or the building and to feel that they are in the presence of an academic considered piece of work. To a very large extent, they succeed. We should also consider Swogger's admonition of avoiding the tyranny of representation implicit in single interpretations by providing a multiplicity of interpretations - easily done with drawings but not so with experimental reconstructions where considerations of cost, space and time bear heavily upon the undertaking.

Windows of the mind

Following from Swogger's three "windows" through which he considers viewers approach a visual representation in archaeology - we can now consider some of the techniques that might be used to mediate these windows. The first of these, the media and techniques employed to create the images can be demonstrated by taking several contrasting examples of different illustrators. An impersonal style in which no people are shown and where no activities are depicted represents a purer, though limited, presentation of the archaeological evidence whether or not it is done through a drawing or a painting. In each case the interpretation is based largely on the actual excavated evidence and is shown as an axonometric view of the site.

Other techniques employed are, for example: cutaways of structures, the lack of specific detail of, for example, bindings of timbers, the lack of detail of carpentry joints or, the vagueness of the exact pattern of roof layout (**fig. 1**) (James 1997, fig. 2.8, p.41). Styles of drawing or painting with more cursive, broader strokes and rougher, contrasting shading can also lend an unfinished or sketchy feel to the illustration which compels the viewer to question and interpret the image and which imposes an additional intellectual distance between the viewer and the image-maker. Contrasted to this are the more imaginative reconstructions of real sites which are portrayed in an idealised fashion frequently with people and activities depicted and which can detract from the intellectual distance providing a more comfortable evocation of the past (see Swogger 2000, fig 12.3, p146 for examples of these different styles). Where detailed research has been carried out on a topic and considerable evidence has been brought to bear on a topic, more detailed images can be created (James 1997, fig. 2.6, p.36).

When we look at the third of Swogger's three windows - that of presentation - we must consider whether or not we take the more imaginative route and accept the intuitive, subconscious involvement so characteristic of the creative/ artistic approach. Renfrew certainly

sees the importance in this approach and considers it to be a valuable and legitimate part of the archaeological experience. In this approach the creation of the image by the artist and the interpretation of that image by the viewer are both deeply personal processes which are not necessarily approaching the material with the same understanding nor with the same expected outcome. If we want to overcome this we have to adopt a slightly different way of looking at the presentation of the material - and that comes from social and literary theory. Current theories of pictorial meaning divide rather sharply into two main categories: perceptual theories based on the idea of resemblance, and social theories, which insist upon the essential role of shared practice and convention. In the first of these, images are understood by the viewer by reference to mental images of familiar material that has been built up over a lifetime of experiencing the world. In the second theory, images are understood through shared cultural practice and the observation of conventional symbolic representation. In simplistic terms, it is the difference between navigating your way through an unfamiliar landscape either by interpreting that landscape by comparison to a more familiar one or by navigating using a map. These two types of theory would appear to be irreconcilable, in terms of both their logic and their empirical

implications. Either pictorial meaning is intrinsic and universal, or it is extrinsic and culturally relative. (Costall 1997). What we need to find is a way of presenting archaeological images that take both of these theories into account and this can be done by looking at how we read a book.

The visual language of interpretation

The single greatest difference between the image and the text is in the way that they are read. Reading a text involves stepping through a sequential series of experiences in which information is gradually released and the reader is guided to a particular standpoint or understanding. Whether the reader accepts that standpoint or not is up to them. What is important is that the reader is given access to all the information in a structured manner. With drawings and reconstructions this is not the case. The viewer is given access to the entire "idea" "presentation" or image in one instance - there is no structure to the experience. And this is where Renfrew's assertion about the parallel processes of the artist and the archaeologist comes into play. In order to make sense of the image the viewer resorts to an intuitive approach which immediately colours their later, more considered academic approach. This is also the point where some of the influences of our own cultural and

personal backgrounds discussed earlier affect or cloud our judgement.

As with text, in our drawings and reconstructions we should, perhaps, attempt to create a sequential, linear educational experience by directing and managing the viewers' access to the interpretation. Sequences of drawings with multiple interpretations and details of the evidence laid out before the reader can easily be achieved and would incorporate the illustrations more effectively with the text. When considering experimental archaeology reconstructions or open air museums physical pathways created through them in which the viewer gradually builds up information and knowledge are being developed at some projects and can create a developed linear educational experience for the viewer. This is an approach that was attempted on one project with which I have had considerable involvement; at the Lemba Experimental Village in Cyprus (Thomas 1999). However, this approach was really only effective while work was taking place on site and the process of experimental archaeology was evident. Then the viewer or visitor could make sense of the site and could build up an experience of how archaeology itself worked. One further example where this has been achieved fairly successfully is the Scottish Crannog Centre. The gallery and centre introduce the visitor to some aspects of the archaeological evidence and the methods in which it was acquired before being led through the various stages of the interpretation of that evidence, followed by an experience of the technologies involved before finally progressing on to the full scale replica of the crannog itself (fig. 4) A linear sequence of the learning experience or a visual language of interpretation has been created allowing the visitor access to a more measured assessment of the

site, the data and its interpretation. This is an approach that has been developed by any number of other open air museum sites across Europe and America, although whether or not the visual language of interpretation is explicitly employed is not always evident.

If we continue with the literary metaphor this is effectively creating a grammar or language for viewing and reading archaeological visual art and data. It provides a structured way of reading or viewing the images or the sites. So, how does this all help with my initial quest for transparency and academic rigour in the way we present archaeological images? I think that it all comes down to the final line in the anonymous proverb quoted earlier: "I do and I understand." It is in the "doing" of something that the greatest engagement with the material is achieved. By making it less easy to accept a reconstruction drawing or an experimental replica on first view and by encouraging the viewer to engage in some sort of discourse with the subject a different approach is developed. This can determine how reconstruction drawings are incorporated into a publication as an integral part of the narrative. It can also determine the layout and development of experimental sites and archaeological open air museums. In both cases the viewer or visitor must be given access to enough information to be able to make their own assessment of the evidence. This should be an on-going and developmental process, which both informs the artist-craftsman and educates the viewer.

Bibliography

Childe, V. Gordon 1938: "The experimental production of the phenomena distinctive of vitrified forts" *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 72, 44-55.
Costall, Alan 1997: "Things and things like them" in Molyneaux B, *The Cultural Life of Images: visual representation in archaeology*, 49-59.

Hodder, Ian (ed) 2000: *Towards Reflexive Method in Archaeology; the example of Çatalhöyük*, British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara Monograph No. 28, McDonald Institute for Archaeological Research: Cambridge.

James, Simon 1997: "Drawing Inferences: visual reconstructions in theory and practice" in Molyneaux, B, *The Cultural Life of Images: visual representation in archaeology*, 22-48.

Molyneaux, Brian (ed.) 1997: *The Cultural Life of Images: visual representation in archaeology*. Routledge: London.

Renfrew, Colin 2003: *Figuring it Out; the parallel visions of artists and archaeologists*, Thames & Hudson: London.

Sorrell, Mark 1981 (ed.): Alan Sorrell: *Reconstructing the Past*, Batsford: London.

Swogger, John G. 2000: "Image and Interpretation: the Tyranny of Representation" in Hodder (ed.) *Towards Reflexive Method in Archaeology; the example of Çatalhöyük*, 143-152.

Thomas, Gordon D. 1999: "The role of research and education in site management at the Lemba Experimental Village, Cyprus" *Conservation and Management of Archaeological Sites*, 3 (1&2) 103-123.

Thomas, Gordon D. 2005: *The Prehistoric Buildings of Chalcolithic Cyprus; the Lemba Experimental Village, BAR International Series 1444*, British Archaeological Reports: Oxford.

Summary

"Images du Passé" : Illustrer et mettre en image l'archéologie

L'utilisation d'images est indispensable à qui veut présenter l'archéologie au grand public, que ce soit par le biais de dessins ou de reconstitutions expérimentales d'objets et de bâtiments. L'image achevée, si elle est mal manipulée, peut être très convainquante et peut induire en erreur les gens dans leur conception et leur interprétation du passé. Nous devons garder en tête que le processus de création de ces images est soumis à plusieurs influences : les preuves archéologiques disponibles, le contexte culturel des concepteurs, et les compétences créatives et imaginatives des participants. Devons-nous alors tendre vers la pure objectivité ou devons-nous accepter cette multiplicité des interprétations qui sous-tendent dans nos dessins et nos

reconstitutions ? Une solution serait d'essayer de créer des séquences, une expérience linéaire en permettant aux spectateurs d'accéder à l'interprétation au lieu de leur présenter une image figée, en créant ainsi une expérience proche de la lecture d'un texte.

Vorstellungen von der Vergangenheit: Zur Dar- und Vorstellung von Archäologie

Die Anwendung von Bildern ist ein integraler Bestandteil der Methoden wie archäologische Ergebnisse heute innerhalb des Faches und für die Öffentlichkeit präsentiert werden, sei es nun in Form von Rekonstruktionszeichnungen oder experimentalarchäologischen Repliken und Gebäudemodellen. Ein fertiges bzw. vollständiges (Ab-)Bild kann, wenn es unkritisch vorgestellt wird, sehr suggestiv wirken und kann dazu führen, dass die Betrachter unbewusst eine Interpretation einer anderen vorziehen. Wir müssen uns daran erinnern, dass der Erarbeitungsprozess eines solchen (Ab-)Bildes von mehreren Faktoren abhängt: Den vorhandenen archäologischen Daten, dem kulturellen Hintergrund der Person, die das (Ab-)Bild erstellt hat, sowie den kreativen und gedanklichen Möglichkeiten der Beteiligten. Sollen wir uns um klare Objektivität bemühen oder sollen wir akzeptieren, dass es eine Vielzahl von Interpretationen gibt, welche in unseren Zeichnungen und Hausmodellen wiederzufinden sind? Eine Möglichkeit besteht darin, dass wir versuchen können, eine aufeinanderfolgende, lineare und didaktisch begründete Erfahrung für das Verständnis des Betrachters für die vorliegende Interpretation zu ermöglichen und nicht sofort ein vollständiges (Ab-)Bild zu zeigen. Dabei würde es sich dann um einen dem Lesen von Texten ähnlichen Verständnisprozess handeln.

■ **Dr Gordon Thomas** is a Senior Lecturer in Archaeology at the University of Edinburgh. He previously worked for many years as an illustrator before taking up his post at the University where he developed an interest in how images are used and understood. His other research interests include: experimental archaeology, lime plaster technology, prehistoric buildings and site formation processes.