Speaking for the past in the present

Text, authority and learning in archaeology museums

Robin Skeates

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development of debates surrounding the nature of curatorial authority and of public education in archaeology museums, with particular reference to texts accompanying exhibitions of prehistoric material in England and Scotland. Traditionally, such texts have been conceived of as authoritative aids to museum education and communication. However, since the late 1980s, they have been criticised, particularly on the grounds of curatorial bias and inaccessibility. As a consequence, a new 'cultural approach' to museum texts was developed in the 1990s, based upon curatorial principles of critical awareness and public responsibility. The resultant texts have received mixed responses from museum archaeologists and visitors, whose perspectives reflect contemporary political tensions in Britain. They also highlight the fundamental question of the future status and role of text in museums. The answer proposed here is that texts, although not entirely popular with visitors, will remain key elements of archaeology museum displays, and that differences of curatorial approach and opinion, as expressed through texts, are beneficial to learning in archaeology museums.

INTRODUCTION

Archaeology museum curators act as persons authorised to mediate between the material remains of past societies and contemporary audiences. They do so in particular through their display of selected classes of silent antiquities, together with texts and images that seek to explain those objects and their original owners. Such texts, which include information panels and object labels, vary greatly both within and between museums, in terms of where they are placed and what they refer to. But often such texts give the reader an impression of detached scientific objectivity, despite the fact that they convey opinions that say as much about the reproduction of the past in the present as about any past reality. Because of this inherent contradiction in the role of archaeology museum texts, they have become closely associated with important debates concerning the nature of curatorial authority and public education in museums. This paper examines the development of these debates, with particular reference to texts forming part of five of the most recent and innovative museum displays of prehistoric archaeology in England and Scotland.

TRADITIONAL TEXTS

For over a century, professional museum curators have carefully researched and designed text labels, and displayed them together with collections of objects, as part of educative exhibitions intended to be experienced by a general public. The purpose of such labels has primarily been to enhance the public legibility of the exhibited objects, so that their scientific meaning might be understood immediately and without assistance (Hooper Greenhill, 1992: 205–10; Bennett, 1998). Leading on from this perspective, and under the

influence of a post-war semiotic approach, it has been possible for some museologists to conceive of text labels as part of a museum communication system, in which the content of an exhibition is transmitted by the exhibitor and received by the visitor (e.g. Pearce, 1990: 144–9, 162).

Archaeology museum curators have used text labels extensively in this way, as aids to education and communication. In particular, labels have been used to describe and classify artefacts, with reference to categories such as their display number, archaeological type, form, manufacturing technique, function, raw material, relative age, archaeological culture, provenance, collector, donor, date of discovery or acquisition and museum accession number. In some cases, labels in archaeology museums also carry statements about the historical significance of the artefacts, and (especially in university or antiquarian society museums) references to authoritative publications providing further information.

Here is a fairly random selection of typical examples of labels from traditional displays in four different types of archaeology museum (national, civic, private society, and university) that I encountered in 2000:

1 from the Early Bronze Age Cyclades section of the Pre-classical Greece galleries, The Louvre, Paris
   3 & 4
   Violin-shaped figurines
   Early Cycladic I
   (32000–2700 BC)
   Pelos Group
   Marble
   This schematic type that has an outline recalling that of a violin is the first stylised attempt at the human figure, elaborated in the Cyclades.
   Legs Kann, 1949
   Don Koutoulakis, 1949
   3 – Ma 3505
   4 – Ma 3508
2 from Room 1: Paris from its Origins through the Middle Ages, Musée Carnavalet, Paris
   BURIN
   Silex
   Moustérien
   Villejuif (1934-1935)
   Coll. E. Giraud, don. Ch. Sacchia
   PR 1418

3 from Archaeology section, Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society Museum
   Fungus, Formes Formentaria
   Starr Carr 1951
   REFS. P.P.S. 1949-1950
   WHIT M. ARC/000
4 from Museum of Antiquities, University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne
   Bell-derivative Beaker
   Lilburn Hill, Wooler, N'D
   Clarke 687. Class S4
   1888.22.1

These examples clearly vary from curator to curator, and between museums, but all arguably aspire to the traditional museological model of education and communication – albeit with reference to different general audiences (such as 'the public' and scholars).

THE CRITIQUE OF TRADITIONAL TEXTS

Despite the presumably well-meant intentions of their authors, traditional museum texts such as these have been subject to much serious criticism since the mid-1980s. At least five general points of criticism have been raised.

Although texts that form part of permanent displays of museum collections often become 'imbued with an aura of unquestioned truth' (Coxall, 1991: 93), they are not neutral lists of objective facts; they are, instead, fundamentally interpretative narratives (c.f. Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 68–9, 90–7; Serrell, 1996: 9, 28–31).

Although museum texts may appear to be anonymous, they are in fact social constructs, which can subtly and unintentionally express the value judgements and prejudices of their author-curators, including those relating to education, class, ethnicity and gender (Coxall, 1990; 1991: 92–3).

More specifically, museum texts can be used as political educational tools, although precisely in what way and how effectively is open to question. According to the perspective that regards museums as ideological institutions, museum texts may serve to express and maintain unequal relations of power between experts and their audiences, by constructing particular historical narratives that privilege dominant meanings and silence alternative discourses (c.f. Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 68,

90; Hooper Greenhill, 1999: 14–23). From an alternative perspective, museum texts produced by reformist museum staff may serve to transform the existing social order, by providing a script for a new social order (Bennett, 1998).

Research on museum visitors suggests that traditional texts contribute to people finding museum exhibitions difficult to concentrate on and understand. One cause of this is the museum environment, in which visitors generally have to read museum texts in poor light, whilst standing up, in a distracting space in which other material and visitors compete for their attention (Ekarv, 1986–7: 1; Sabine and Gilmore, 1997: 72). But another key reason is that curators have often succeeded in asserting their intellectual authority but have equally failed to consider their visitors, including their differing degrees of prior knowledge, visual ability, interest and available time (Pearce, 1990: 195; Hooper Greenhill, 1992: 210; Serrell, 1996: 233–4). They have consequently written texts that contain too much raw information and too many general concepts and inaccessible (specialist) terms. Indeed, many traditional museum displays have been described as illustrated 'textbooks', written in a linear format. Perhaps unfairly, the authors and designers of traditional archaeology museum texts have therefore been accused of being self-indulgent (Schadla-Hall and Davidson, 1982: 174–5).

Museum labels can devalue the objects that they accompany, by fixing the objects as authentications and illustrations of curatorial statements about the past, and distancing them further from their former 'social lives' (c.f. Appadurai, 1986; Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 74–6; Hooper Greenhill, 1992: 205; Pearce, 1999: 19–20).

The text accompanying the display in the old Prehistory Gallery of the Museum of London (opened to the public in 1976) is an example of a widely criticised traditional archaeology museum text (e.g. Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 74–6; Cotton and Wood, 1996, 54; Merriman, 1996: 60–2). One of the fundamental problems was that 'the work was carried out with little real information on visitors' needs and priorities' (Cotton and Wood, 1996: 54). As a consequence, visitors encountered numerous difficulties. The text was over-long and tiring, comprising 10,000 words and large quantities of information. The lack of an introduction or signs was confusing. There was little highlighting or summarising of key points. The white-on-black captions were unpopular. The text was written in a distanced and authoritative academic style, which offered a single definitive history of London accompanied by relatively high-level factual information, but little consideration of, for instance, the role of women and cultural diversity in the city's long history.

NEW TEXTS

In response to these criticisms, museum theorists and practitioners have begun to develop a new 'cultural approach' to museum texts. Theorists, drawing upon cultural studies, call for the democratisation and personalisation of museum authorship, and talk of different members of interpretative communities (with different skills, knowledge and agendas) collaborating to produce and transform negotiated and relevant, reflexive and multiple, interpretative narratives, as well as interactive and rewarding learning experiences, of museum collections (c.f. Fish, 1980; and e.g. Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 98; Hooper Greenhill, 1999: 4, 15–23). Practitioners, drawing upon visitor surveys, talk more about critical awareness and their responsibilities to the public, and the need for accessible visitor-based interpretative experiences informed by audience research (e.g. Coxall, 1990; 1991; Pearce, 1990: 195, 202). Both have contributed to the development of a new style of museum text.

In fact, a whole body of good practice has been established with reference to the production, display and evaluation of museum text (e.g. Serrell, 1983; 1996; Ferguson et al., 1995). Ekarv, for example, has researched and championed the use of an 'easy-to-read' style of text, which tends to increase visitor reading and comprehension (e.g. Ekarv, 1986–87; Sabine and Gilmore, 1997). Characteristic features include:

- the use of simple spoken language, the active form of verbs, and relatively short lines and paragraphs
- the inclusion of visually referenced information and images
- the maintenance of close co-operation between the writers, curators and designers of an exhibition.

To complement this approach, various methods

have been devised to assess the effectiveness of museum texts. Relatively simple examples are the Fry and Cloze readability tests, which provide measures of how easy a text is to read and comprehend (Carter, 1993); and an elaborate example is the 'scriptovisual evaluation grid', used in Québec to assess systematically the content, layout and positioning of museum texts (Blais, 1995).

This new cultural approach to museum texts has been put into practice in a number of archaeology displays in England and Scotland over the last decade. Here are just a few key examples.

A pioneering example was provided by the archaeology exhibition in Dorset County Museum in the late 1980s, where the scene was set by the first textual statement, 'There is so much we do not know' (Pearce, 1999: 26).

The Alexander Keiller Museum in Avebury then took this theme of curatorial honesty and uncertainty further in its re-display of 1991 (Stone, 1994). In planning the new exhibition for non-specialist visitors, the curatorial team (from English Heritage) consulted with a variety of people, including archaeology specialists, school pupils, teachers and official education advisors. The constraints and challenges offered by the new UK National Curriculum for schools were also carefully taken into account. As a consequence, the curatorial team decided to focus on illustrating the limitations of archaeological evidence and the subjectivity of interpretations based upon such material. Text played an important part in this. For example, the caption in Figure 1 accompanies a 'schizophrenic' life-size model of a man, one half presented as a wild and ragged individual, the

other half presented as a more sophisticated individual with well-made clothes and body decoration. It also ends by rejecting a stereotypical caveman cartoon image. A series of 'clipboards' was also used to provide additional descriptions of different archaeological sites, as well as raising questions about their locations and functions.

A similar approach was adopted in the archaeology section of the Tullie House Museum in Carlisle, also in 1991. The desire to ensure public accessibility appears to have been a guiding principle in the creation of the display. For example, a simple label accompanying a prehistoric stone artefact manages to provide some interesting and distinctive information in an accessible and succinct way:

KNIFE
This is the finest knife blade and the only one of its type yet found in Cumbria. The edge is extremely sharp. From Bampton.

Curatorial honesty, uncertainty and questions also formed part of the textual agenda. For example, a text-panel on the interpretation of prehistoric stone circles states:

No one is quite sure why they were built: were they for worship? Did human sacrifices take place in them? Perhaps they acted as astronomical observatories? Some people think that they were used as landing stations for spaceships! The pottery, human bones and evidence of fires found in some stone circles would suggest that they were used for religious purposes. Perhaps gods were worshipped to ensure good harvests, good health and the return of the sun in the spring.
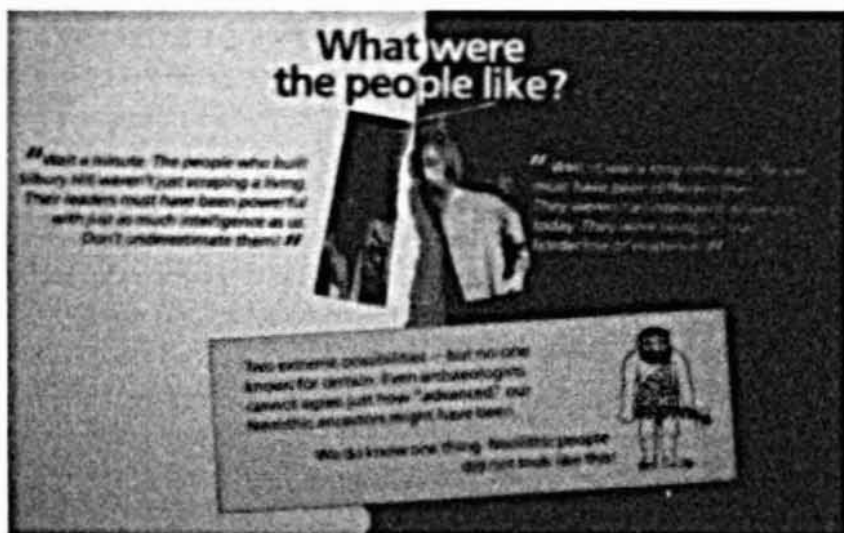
These new displays led to perhaps the ultimate example of the application of the new cultural approach to archaeology museum texts, in the 'People before London' prehistory gallery in the Museum of London, which was opened to the public in 1994 (and prematurely closed in 2000). The project was initiated by Nick Merriman, the head of the museum's Department of Early London History and Collections, and

Figure 1. Text panel in the Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury. (Reproduced with the kind permission of English Heritage)

the curators were Johnathan Cotton and Barbara Wood (Cotton and Wood, 1996; Merriman, 1996; Wood, 1996; Cotton, 1997).

Visitor research played a major part in the redisplay of this 'permanent' gallery. A general survey of visitors to the Museum of London showed that 40% of the annual visitors were children, under 16 years of age, and that at certain times of the year up to 65% of visitors were from overseas. Hence, the curators realised that they could not assume much prior knowledge of London's history and topography, and that they would have to focus on communicating at least basic concepts in a simple and clear way, accompanied by foreign language summaries and guidebooks. A specific survey then asked visitors to describe what the term 'prehistoric' meant to them as they left the museum. The most common answer was 'dinosaurs', which persuaded the curators to challenge this and other popular stereotypes of prehistory. 34 visitors were also interviewed in detail to assess the accessibility and design of a mock-up text panel. Most were attracted to large dramatic images rather than slabs of undifferentiated text. The curators consequently decided to write clear and straightforward sentences, accompanied by explanations of any technical terms.

Shanks and Tilley's politicised de-construction of traditional museological representations of the past and radical proposals for future archaeology displays (1987) were also explicitly taken into account by the curators (e.g. Cotton and Wood, 1996: 55), who introduced a degree of political content into the display, juxtaposed certain artefacts with contemporary objects, emphasised authorship and the historical contingency of archaeological interpretations, and encouraged people to construct their own pasts in the museum (c.f. Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 98). As Nick Merriman stated: 'Rather than presenting a single authoritative view of London's history, we will be attempting to show that the process of interpretation is a much more complex and subtle one than often appears in museums, and that other versions of London's history are possible' (Merriman, 1996: 62).

The use of text in the new gallery clearly reflected these aims. In order to cater for different visitor requirements, the text was divided according to a four-tier hierarchy of information, consisting of:

- large narrative 'gateway' panels introducing the main chronological phases in a conversational tone
- smaller panels on specific sites and themes characterised by open-ended discussions that left visitors to draw their own conclusions
- captions accompanying objects or illustrations
- loose-leaf ring-binders, entitled 'Find out more ...', containing bibliographies and up-dated news of current projects.

In order to humanise the exhibition and provide basic information at a glance, the text panels were structured with evocative headlines and bulletpoints. For example, the earliest period of prehistory (known to archaeologists as the Lower Palaeolithic) carried the headline:

Living on the edge (500,000-28,000 BC): Early humans in competition with each other and the environment

Also, in order to face up to the problems of curatorial authority and voice, the start of the gallery was marked by a signed text panel intended to establish a dialogue between the curators and visitors:

CAN YOU BELIEVE WHAT WE SAY?
The Prehistoric gallery deals with the time 'before history'. By definition, there are no written records ...
FILLING THE GAP
Archaeology supplies our evidence, although the difficulties of recording the fragile traces of London's earliest part are enormous. Usually it is only possible to salvage shreds of information.
THE PRESENT IS THE PAST
These shreds can be interpreted in many ways, however objectively they are recorded. As each succeeding generation projects its own present onto the past, any number of prehistories are possible.
POLITICALLY PRESENT...AND CORRECT?
This gallery is a reflection of our present. We have tried to humanise the past by focusing on specific sites and the needs of individual people, and by giving greater prominence to green and gender issues.
How will this standpoint be judged in the future? What do you think?
Johnathan Cotton and Barbara Wood, Curators, November 1994

The final panel in the gallery then asked: 'Now what does prehistory mean to you?'.

NEW REVIEWS

The curatorial team working on the 'People before London' project clearly put a substantial effort into avoiding the problems of traditional displays and into learning the lessons of the new cultural approach to text. But did they succeed in striking the right balance, particularly in terms of text, learning and authority? Not surprisingly, the answer depends on your perspective.

The three key members of the curatorial team have published generally positive reports on their achievements (see references above). They also refer to summative evaluation, anecdotal evidence and personal observation indicating that most visitors seem to have appreciated their approach. Museologists have also been generally impressed. For example, Simon James states: 'The Museum of London's new prehistory gallery is a fine example of best current practice in planning and executing archaeology projects in museums. ... Their attitude is miles away from the authoritative statements of truth presented in some museums' (James, 1995: 20). Janet Owen wrote: 'the People Before London Gallery at the Museum of London really grasps the post-modernist "nettle" and attempts to expose the contemporary face of archaeology' (Owen, 1996: 213). And Susan Pearce commended: 'Honesty in exhibition ... giving us the kind of sincerity written into the panel texts at the beginning of the Museum of London's new prehistoric gallery' (Pearce, 1999: 26).

But there have been some dissenters, particularly over the self-reflective nature of the exhibition and its text. The editors of the popular UK magazine *Current Archaeology*, Andrew and Wendy Selkirk, and a visitor who complained to one of the curators, accused the curators of excessive 'political correctness' (Selkirk and Selkirk, 1994–5: 342; Cotton, 1997: 8). Alan Saville, Archaeology Curator at the National Museums of Scotland, was equally outspoken (Saville, 1999). Emphasising the point that the 'People before London' gallery was intended as a permanent exhibition, with an expected life of 20 years, he criticised the curators for their loss of confidence,

particularly in rejecting 'tried-and-tested', 'common sense', methods of presenting object-based displays in favour of a short-term 'fad' of academic relativism, characterised by 'distasteful' over-personalisation, 'in order to win post-modernist "street-cred"'. He also accused them of succumbing to pressures 'to mix it with the heritage centres' in adopting 'tabloid newspaper headlines'.

To a certain extent, these opposing museological perspectives simply reflect basic contemporary political tensions in Britain, in which 'right-wing' Conservatives accuse the governing 'socialist' New Labour Party of 'political correctness' and the 'dumbing-down' of culture. The debate also resembles Pierre Bourdieu's 'classification struggle', in which 'old aged conservatives' and 'irresponsible youths' compete for control over the classificatory system of museums and galleries (Bourdieu, 1984). But it should also be noted that this debate is long overdue in British museum archaeology, having previously been considered and resolved in favour of more user-friendly texts, first in the early 1980s in museums of all kinds in America and since 1985 in science museums in the UK, following the publication of the Royal Society report on the *Public Understanding of Science* (Royal Society, 1985; anonymous referee pers. comm., 2001).

For my own part, I have mixed feelings about the 'People before London' gallery, particularly in relation to the issues of text, learning and authority. Like other museum archaeologists, I too remember being both impressed and stimulated when I first visited the gallery. I noted favourably, for example, some clear and concise text on a panel trying to cope with introducing half a million years of prehistory:

Prehistory of London – 500,000 BC – AD 43

The first humans arrived during the Ice Age, half a million years ago. Over time they evolved from hunters into farmers and metalworkers. They settled into tribal communities within the area of the Thames. Though trade contacts were strengthened with Rome when Julius Caesar landed in South East Britain in 55 and 54 BC, it was not until 90 years later that the Romans took charge of government.

The gallery also conformed to many of the ideals that I have since promoted in my own writing on the

archaeological heritage (Skeates, 2000: 118–24). This vision for the future of archaeology sees professionals genuinely engaging in dialogue with their heterogeneous public, providing them with greater physical and mental access to archaeological work and to the material remains of the past, and providing them with questions and food for thought, at the same time offering them new stories about the past. It also highlights the difficult task facing archaeologists in searching for the elusive point of balance between playing the expert and being human. Overall, I think that the Museum of London's curatorial team struck a pretty good balance between self-reflection and getting on with the job of presenting the past for their public. However, that is not to say that they succeeded in overcoming the problem of curatorial authority. Unequal relations of power were still inherent in their display, and especially in their text, which ultimately still spoke for the past and manipulated the visitor. In a sense, all they did was establish a new form of curatorial authority: one that was more subtly masked by written admissions of bias and offers of democratic learning.

LATEST TEXTS

Two new displays of prehistoric material in Scottish museums have recently offered fresh opportunities to revisit some of these issues.

The first is the Kilmartin House Museum of Ancient Culture in Argyll, which was co-founded by David Clough and Rachel Butter in 1998, and which has won many awards, including Scottish Museum of the Year and the Gulbenkian Prize for Museums and Galleries (Butter, 1999; Ascherson, 2000; Heywood, 2000). The displays here, which are similar in style to those of the Alexander Keiller Museum and the 'People before London' gallery, clearly conform to the new cultural approach to text. For example, an introductory text panel begins by encouraging visitors to interpret the past for themselves, and then ends with an admission of the limits to scientific and curatorial authority:

Constructing the Past
We all play historian, whether by looking at photos, reminiscing, or constructing family trees. Reconstructing the past is an important part of our everyday lives.
....

Our knowledge is always imperfect and ever-changing; for some, understanding may be more spiritual than scientific.

Different versions of the latter statement are reiterated throughout the display, on text panels that admit to gaps in the historical narrative where there is insufficient evidence, but which also have a stab at well-reasoned interpretation. For example. the panel on the Bronze Age landscape states:

... No techniques – scientific or archaeological – can yet tell us exactly how the valley was used, but on the evidence of rich artefacts and the disciplined organisation of space, we have envisaged a stratified society with a few important individuals controlling access to and within the valley. ...

Throughout the display, the text-based interpretations remain tentative, and in the case of interpretations of Bronze Age 'carved rocks' visitors are even provided with a list of alternative interpretations and asked what they think, in an attempt to encourage them to reach their own understandings. In terms of my own experience, I must admit that sometimes this curatorial strategy began to frustrate me, but compensation was richly provided in other places by the use of some captivatingly simple and evocative language. For example, the panel on later prehistoric bogs and metalwork begins:

In about 700 BC someone thrust three swords into a bog on an island 7 miles from Kilmartin ...

This, like much of the display's narrative, in the words of one visitor, 'Caught the imagination and made us want to know more' (museum visitors book, 2001).

The second new display, which also opened to the public in 1998, is that of the 'Early Peoples' gallery in the Museum of Scotland. The result here is particularly interesting, in that the curatorial team from the Department of Archaeology, which included David Clarke as Head of Exhibitions and Jenni Calder as script co-ordinator, have established a quite distinctive, and controversial, position towards museum display and text (Clarke, 1996; 1998; 2000; Malone and Stoddart, 1999; McKean, 2000; Wade, 2001).

In order to question and avoid any nationalist bias, they have rejected a culture-historical approach in favour of a primarily thematic display (Clarke, 1996). And, in order to 'make the objects do the work' (D. Clarke pers. comm. 2001), and to 'present the stories objects can tell' (J. Calder, quoted in Ascherson, 2000: 83), the exhibition is dominated by artefacts from the museum's rich archaeological collections (as opposed to extended text-based discussions of those objects or hands-on activities).

As for the text panels, they are equally, if not more, authoritative than those of the Museum of London. For example, the first half of an introductory panel accompanying a selection of artefacts displayed within a group of Paolozzi sculptures in Room 1 admits to the limitations of archaeological interpretation, but maintains the right to represent a consensus viewpoint that is 'as factual as can be' (D. Clarke pers. comm., 2001), and which asserts a curatorial authority to tell visitors how to experience the exhibition:

Moving around in their world

No one knows what early people looked like – with a few exceptions, they didn't make images of themselves.

The objects adorning these groups of figures are interpreted as jewellery or dress accessories. These are reasonable and generally accepted interpretations, but nothing is absolutely certain. Moving through this exhibition calls for you to use your imagination to build wider contexts from the objects and related information in order to understand the lives of early people.

Further on, introductory text panels then assume an even greater curatorial authority to speak for the people of the past, by quite literally putting words into their mouths (however based these may be on 'reasonable and generally accepted interpretations'). Here are the opening lines from an example in Room 2:

A generous land

Fat of the land

We ate well and gave thanks, our food plentiful and healthy. At first we lived off what we gathered from the land, the beasts we hunted and the fish we caught. Later, we farmed as well, growing crops and raising animals.

Rachel Butter has appropriately criticised this approach, in arguing that while the literary use of

'we' may help to narrow the gap between the silent material remains of the past and present-day museum visitors, ambiguities surround the unspecified identity of 'we', to the extent that 'one can't help distrusting such a narrator' (R. Butter, quoted in Ascherson, 2000: 83). David Clarke has since clarified that 'we' are 'the powerless majority': 'the extensive majority at any period that do not feel a sense of significance, status or power' (D. Clarke pers. comm. 2001; 2000: 221). Butter also pointed out that the displays are, 'highly authorial but do not admit the presence of the *auteur*' (ibid). In response, David Clarke, who certainly has no desire to portray the curator as an expert, claims that 'nothing is gained by adding the name of the *auteur*', and asks, 'would his name add to the visitors' sense of his existence?' (D. Clarke pers. comm., 2001; 2000: 221). However, seen in the context of earlier archaeology museum displays, the text of the 'Early Peoples' gallery still appears to represent a reassertion of an anonymous curatorial authority to communicate and educate. Furthermore, the fact that the exhibition requires some background knowledge and a reading age of 13 (Malone and Stoddart, 1999: 486), combined with Clarke's comment that 'It's meant to be tough – you're meant to come back' (pers. comm., 2001), suggests that the display and its text carry unrealistically high expectations of visitors, both to spend time contemplating their messages, and to spend money on repeat visits.

THE FUTURE OF TEXT

Whether either of these latest examples will come to be used as models for future archaeology museum text-writers remains to be seen. But all of the examples of innovative texts accompanying museum displays of prehistoric material that have been discussed above demonstrate both the potential and the limitations of the new 'cultural approach' to museum texts, particularly in terms of their intended role as effective mediators between museum collections and visitors. On the positive side, they have generally served to present archaeological evidence and interpretations in an honest and accessible way, and they have encouraged visitors to reach their own interpretations of the past. But on the negative side they appear to have alienated some regular museum visitors (such as the one who complained to the curators of the

'People before London' gallery, mentioned above), raising new doubts in their minds, not only about the past but also about the role of public museums and their curators, who seem prone to displaying overtly personalised and politicised messages.

At the same time, broader questions still remain over the future status and role of text in museums. Do we still need museum texts? And if so, what do we want from them? Contemporary material culture studies provide a useful starting point in answering these questions, in that they point out that objects do not speak for themselves and that they demand interpretation (e.g. Miller, 1994). Archaeology museum texts, as we have seen, are a problematic medium through which to deal with such interpretation, but we should not underestimate the manipulative power and authority vested in alternative media, such as official audio-visuals and live-guides.

Texts, then, are perhaps as 'good' or as 'bad' as any other medium of museum interpretation. Anyway, texts must surely remain key elements in our experiences of museum collections for as long as they are missed when they are not there. In the British Museum, for example, Room 63 (covering 'Daily Life in Ancient Egypt') used to lack (as far as I could see) text panels, and I missed them, sensing a lack of clarity about the interpretative themes and information relating to the objects. But that is not to say that texts have to be quite so widespread in archaeology museum displays. A useful warning was provided by focus sessions held in the Museum of London's 'People before London' gallery by the Susie Fisher Group. These revealed that 'Text-based information is ... not popular, and, where used, visitors are looking for it to explain things they can see in front of them (for example, captions) rather than telling a larger story in its own right' (Cotton, 1997: 11). Perhaps one way forward, then, is to restrict even further large texts, either to the margins of galleries or to portable guide-books, where visitors can exert an even greater degree of choice over whether or not to read them. That said, there is surely a limit, which has arguably been over-stepped in the case of the new display at Segedunum Roman Fort Museum at Wallsend, where text is mainly relegated to hand-held boards, which visitors generally fail to pick up, let alone read (according to my own informal observations). A greater consideration of museum communication in general, and practical guidelines on museum text writing in particular, together with

the use of formative and summative evaluation, including readability tests, by museum archaeologists in relation to specific exhibitions and visitors should help to refine this point of balance (McManus, 2000). As for the messages that archaeology museum texts contain, perhaps we should not worry unduly about the subtle degrees of curatorial authority that they conceal, or the rate at which they will go out of fashion. Manuals on how to write museum texts are valuable in ensuring that texts are at least comprehensible, but 'there can be no universal method, no formal principles of interpretation and display' (Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 96). Likewise, there is no single way of reading a text (Fish, 1980: 16). At the end of the day, differences rather than uniformity of curatorial approach and opinion, as expressed through texts, will help to signal a healthy archaeology museum-based learning environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Robin Skeates is a Lecturer in Museum Studies and Director of the MA in Museum and Artefact Studies at the University of Durham. His research lies within the related fields of material culture, museum and heritage studies, and he has particular interests in the history of archaeological collecting, public archaeology, and the prehistoric archaeology of the central Mediterranean region.

Contact address: Department of Archaeology, University of Durham, South Road, Durham. DH1 3LE, UK. Tel: + 44 191 374 3625; Fax: + 44 191 374 3619; email: robin.skeates@durham.ac.uk

REFERENCES

Appadurai, A. (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1986).

Ascherson, N. The Museum of Scotland: review. *Public Archaeology* 1 (2000) 82–4.

Bennett, T. Speaking to the eyes: museums, legibility and the social order. In: Macdonald, S. (ed.) *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture.* Routledge, London (1998) 25–35.

Blais, A. Scriptovisual evaluation grid. In: Blais, A. (ed.) *Text in the Exhibition Medium.* Société des Musées Québécois and Musée de la Civilisation, Québec City (1995) 309–11.

Bourdieu, P. *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste.* Routledge & Kegan Paul, London (1984).

Butter, R. *Kilmartin: An Introduction and Guide.* Kilmartin House Trust, Kilmartin (1999).

Carter, J. How old is this text? *Environmental Interpretation* February (1993) 10–11.

Clarke, D.V. Presenting a national perspective of prehistory and early history in the Museum of Scotland. In: Atkinson, J.A., Banks, I. and O'Sullivan, J. (eds.) *Nationalism and Archaeology. Scottish Archaeological Forum.* Cruithne Press, Glasgow (1996) 67–76.

Clarke, D.V. New things set in many landscapes: aspects of the Museum of Scotland. *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 128 (1998) 1-12.

Clarke, D.V. Creating the Museum of Scotland: a reply to Neal Ascherson. *Public Archaeology* 1 (2000) 220–1.

Cotton, J. Illuminating the twilight zone? The new prehistoric gallery at the Museum of London. In: Denford, G.T. (ed.) *Representing Archaeology in Museums.* Society of Museum Archaeologists, Winchester (1997) 6–12.

Cotton, J. and Wood, B. Retrieving prehistories at the Museum of London: a gallery case-study. In: McManus, P.M. (ed.) *Archaeological Displays and the Public: Museology and Interpretation.* Institute of Archaeology, University College London, London (1996) 53–71.

Coxall, H. Museum text as mediated message. *Women, Heritage and Museums,* 14 (1990) 15–21.

Coxall, H. How language means: an alternative view of museums text. In: Kavanagh, G. (ed.) *Museum Languages: Objects and Texts.* Leicester University Press, Leicester (1991) 85–99.

Ekarv, M. Combating redundancy: writing texts for exhibitions. *Exhibitions in Sweden* 27(8) (1986–87) 1–7.

Ferguson, L., MacLulich, C. and Ravelli, L. *Meanings and Messages: Language Guidelines for Museum Exhibitions.* Australian Museum, Sydney (1995).

Fish, S. *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities.* Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA (1980).

Heywood, F. Against the grain. *Museums Journal* 100 (10) (2000) 18–19.

Hooper-Greenhill, E. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge.* Routledge, London (1992).

Hooper-Greenhill, E. Education, communication and interpretation: towards a critical pedagogy in museums. In: Hooper-Greenhill, E. (ed.) *The Educational Role of the Museum,* second edition. Routledge, London (1999) 3–27.

James, S. Plumbing the depths of history. *Museums Journal,* 95(7) (1995) 20–1.

Malone, C. and Stoddart, S. Editorial. *Antiquity* 73 (1999) 485–92.

McKean, C. *The Making of the Museum of Scotland.* National Museums of Scotland Publishing Limited, Edinburgh (2000).

McManus, P.M. Written communications for museums and heritage sites. In: McManus, P.M. (ed.) *Archaeological Displays and the Public: Museology and Interpretations.* Archetype Publications, London (2000, second edition) 97–112.

Merriman, N. Displaying archaeology in the Museum of London. In: Denford, G.T. (ed.) *Museum Archaeology – What's New?.* Society of Museum Archaeologists, Winchester (1996) 60–5.

Miller, D. Artefacts and the meaning of things. In: Ingold, T. (ed.) *Companion Encyclopedia of Anthropology.* Routledge, London (1994) 396–419.

Owen, J. Making histories from archaeology. In: Kavanagh, G. (ed.) *Making Histories in Museums.* Leicester University Press, London (1996) 200–15.

Pearce, S.M. *Archaeological Curatorship.* Leicester University Press, London (1990).

Pearce, S.M. Presenting archaeology. In: Merriman, N. (ed.) *Making Early Histories in Museums.* Leicester University Press, London (1999) 12–27.

Royal Society. *Public Understanding of Science.* Royal Society, London (1985).

Sabine, J. and Gilmore, E. Writing readable texts: evaluation of the Ekarv method. *Museum Practice* 5 (2.2) (1997) 72–5.

Saville, A. Thinking *things* over: aspects of contemporary attitudes towards archaeology, museums and material culture. In: Merriman, N. (ed.) *Making Early Histories in Museums.* Leicester University Press, London (1999) 190–209.

Schadla-Hall, T. and Davidson, J. It's very grand but who's it for? Designing archaeology galleries. *Museums Journal* (March 1982) 171–5.

Selkirk, A. and Selkirk, W. PC museum. *Current Archaeology,* 12(9) (1994–5) 342.

Serrell, B. *Making Exhibit Labels: a Step-by-Step Guide.* American Association for State and Local History Press, Nashville, TN (1983).

Serrell, B. *Exhibit Labels: an Interpretive Approach.* Altamira Press, Walnut Creek, CA (1996).

Shanks, M. and Tilley, C. *Re-Constructing Archaeology: Theory and Practice.* Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1987).

Skeates, R. *Debating the Archaeological Heritage.* Duckworth, London (2000).

Stone, P. The re-display of the Alexander Keiller Museum, Avebury, and the National Curriculum in England. In: Stone, P.G. and Molyneaux, B.L. (eds.) *The Presented Past: Heritage, Museums and Education.* Routledge, London (1994) 190–205.

Wade, M. Treasure house of the people. *The Scotsman,* 21 February (2001) 15.

Wood, B. Wot! No dinosaurs? Interpretation of prehistory and a new gallery at the Museum of London. In: Devonshire, A. and Wood, B. (eds.) *Women in Industry and Technology, from Prehistory to the Present Day: Current Research and the Museum Experience. Proceedings from the 1994 WHAM Conference.* Museum of London, London (1996) 53–63.