

# A professional profession

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This conference on 'Rethinking Irish Archaeology', proposes to address a range of hugely important topics such as heritage management, fieldwork and excavation, research, museum work, and teaching archaeology. This covers just about everything the profession of archaeology does, so I thought I might examine some of these themes and in the process ask the question just 'How professional is the profession' in some of these various areas? Let us briefly consider three topics: Research, Excavation, and Teaching and Communication.

## **Research**

Last year (after a statement on radio that there was little research in archaeology in this country) I attempt a crude effort to quantify the amount of research in Irish archaeology, deliberately ignoring articles in journals, I noted that almost 100 monographs has been published since 1996.

In this impressive figure, about 23% are general works such as county surveys or multiperiod studies; 51% are medieval or post-medieval; 18% are prehistoric and 6% deal with the history of Irish archaeology. The high medieval number (51%) is a real testimony to the growth in medieval archaeology and only nine of these titles are urban archaeology reports (Dublin, Waterford, Cork and Galway). Indeed of all these studies of whatever period, only 25% to 30% might be described as excavation reports. An interesting figure which should obviously be higher but which serves as a reminder that excavation is only a relatively small part of what archaeologists do.

The Department of the Environment's Heritage Service is well represented in this decade's work. In addition to the monumental *Megalithic Survey of Co. Donegal*, a good number of *Archaeological Inventories* have appeared. Con Manning's *Excavations at Roscrea Castle*, the first of the Department's monograph series

and its *Clonmacnoise Studies* series are very significant and welcome developments. The National Museum of Ireland and the Royal Irish Academy continue to produce volumes in the Medieval Dublin Excavations series, the most recent being Clare McCutcheon's *Medieval Pottery from Wood Quay*. The Royal Irish Academy has also just produced *Knowth and the Zooarchaeology of Early Christian Ireland* by Finbar McCormick and Emily Murray.

The Discovery Programme makes a significant contribution; in a range of publications our understanding of the Tara landscape has been altered forever and its studies on *Medieval Rural Settlement*, *Lake Settlement*, and Eoin Grogan's *North Munster Project* are further testimony to this. From the contract or private sector there is a number of welcome publications of excavations in medieval Dublin, that major publication on *Medieval Waterford*, and a small number of others. The recent appearance of *Bronze Age Landscapes* (edited by Eoin Grogan and others) and published by Bord Gais and Margaret Gowen and Co., and Ed Danaher's Sligo monograph and various other volumes in press are very welcome developments too. The move towards full publication of important excavations is to be applauded and it is evident that great strides have been made in recent times in this area. But overall, the small number of publications in any format is still a cause for concern.

## **Excavation**

It is exactly ten years since the growth in the number of excavation began its dramatic increase (the number virtually doubled in 1997). With over 2000 excavations of varying sorts now taking place each year, this aspect of professional practice dominates much of our thinking. Careful scrutiny of the *Excavations Bulletins* to date is an interesting exercise, however. While an enormous amount of data is being generated (and this is undoubtedly important), the number of significantly productive excavations in any one year in the prehistoric field for instance, is surprisingly small. A lot of these licensed

procedures produce limited or negligible results. This does not mean they have no value but less than a dozen and sometimes as few as half a dozen in any one year, in my estimation, are excavations that demand full, speedy and exemplary publication. These are the excavations that might in themselves add to a greater understanding of the past but they seem to be less numerous than some claimants suggest.

Take the Mesolithic period for instance, four thousand years of human habitation on this island. We have recent discoveries of fish traps in Dublin (preliminary publication by Melanie McQuaid and Lorna O'Donnell for Margaret Gowen and Co.) in *Antiquity* 2007 and the remarkable cremations found near Castleconnell, Co. Limerick, briefly published by Tracy Collins and Frank Coyne (Aegis Archaeology) in *Archaeology Ireland*. Their full publication will certainly add enormously to crucial parts of the Mesolithic picture but the picture as a whole still rests on three or four relatively old excavations: Mount Sandel, Newferry, Lough Boora and Ferriter's Cove.

You may ask 'What about Neolithic houses'? With about 100 house sites of one sort or another now recorded, it is true our data on rectangular structures is impressive. We now know, as Bradley pointed out some time ago, that this phase of monumental activity was an interestingly short one in the two millennia or so of the Neolithic period. But how far has our knowledge of economy and subsistence progressed. Where are the crucial sites with significant faunal assemblages for instance? Richard Bradley's recent review of British and Irish prehistory contains surprisingly few new Irish discoveries of a ground-breaking nature. They do exist of course but are they as numerous as we are sometimes given to believe in proportion to the very large amount of excavation work done overall?

I want to stress that I raise this question not because I begrudge the exciting discoveries of others but because I am concerned that the amount of excavation underway at present gives a false impression of what we do collectively as a profession and, to some at least, suggests that this is the only archaeological

route to understanding the past. No one sector of the profession can claim to have a near monopoly on the advancement of archaeological knowledge. Whether we like it or not, we are all a part of a collective enterprise.

Archaeology's techniques are so distinctive that they have their attractions for people who may not be so concerned with interpreting the past. The process of looking and finding is an experience that many of us enjoy, yet it leads to a mistaken notion among the public that archaeology *is* excavation. Worse still, some of those who practice the subject professionally fall into the same way of thinking. That is hardly surprising where the gathering of data is valued as an end in itself. The fetishization of excavation tends to trivialize what archaeologists do and what archaeology is. It is understandable to a degree because of the novelty of exploration, the novelty of discovery, the chance of the unexpected, is often there. But as we all know, excavation is only a small part, though an extremely important part, of archaeological work. It is by no means the summation of archaeological practice.

Excavation is just one of many archaeological techniques and just one of many areas of archaeological work (research, teaching, heritage management, museum work to name a few others). It certainly is the one most in the public eye because of the occasional dramatic discovery, the occasional controversy and sometimes because of the large expenditure of money involved. In perhaps unwittingly promoting the significance of excavation, I believe we are in danger of losing sight of the over-riding precautionary principle in archaeology, that excavation should be a technique of last resort.

The first principle in heritage management is preservation. The archaeological imperative is not always fulfilled through excavation: the imperative guiding archaeology today says that it is our responsibility to remove archaeological obstacles in the way of development. This is an attitude we simply have to reject. Obviously there has to be some balance between the need to safeguard the

archaeological heritage and requirements of development: but it is not our job to be the first to compromise.

Even though it is enunciated time after time, we turn our eyes away from the obvious fact: rescue and research excavation are both the controlled clinical destruction of a part of the archaeological record. This fact should colour all our work, be it in the planning process, in monument protection, in heritage management, or in our approach to development-led archaeology. Note the following statements: 'Although archaeological excavation produces new data ... it also results in the irreversible destruction of part of that resource' from Departmental *Policy and Guidelines on Archaeological Excavation* (1999) and Jean-Paul Demoule, President of the *Institut National de Recherches Archéologiques Préventives* (INRAP) who recently wrote: 'as every student learns, an archaeological excavation is first of all an act of destruction' (2007).

This is why the phrase 'preservation by record' is so professionally unacceptable. It is a euphemism. It is a spin that deliberately tries to conceal the fact that excavation is destruction. There is a discerning public out there who recognize weasel words like these. So when archaeologists use this phrase for rescue excavation, they do the profession a disservice. As Joe Fenwick reminds me, the Dodo is a good analogy, this extinct bird may be considered a good example of preservation by taxidermy.

Equally unhelpful is the suggestion that excavation is better seen as the creation of knowledge rather than an act of destruction. Like surgery being a last resort in the medical profession, the archaeological profession has to take a more critical approach to this admittedly lucrative aspect of its work. Excavation produces data. Excavation may create knowledge—but it also destroys it. Excavation contributes to the diminution of a rapidly diminishing resource.

Thanks to extensive excavation, we now have an imposing monument at Newgrange but will we ever be able to resolve the question whether there was a

quartz wall or a quartz platform (recently examined by Gabriel Cooney in the pages of *Antiquity*)?

Imagine that the Banqueting Hall on Tara had been dug by Ó Ríordáin instead of the Mound of the Hostages and that it had been reconstructed as a rectangular enclosure, we would never have had the imaginative reading of that enigmatic monument by Conor Newman just published in the *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*. Here the so-called hall is seen the ceremonial avenue of Tara, the final part of the processional journey to the summit sanctuary. The *Tech Midchuarta* is probably one of the later monuments on Tara (5th to 8th century AD) and it is designed to unite the remains on Tara into a formal, religious arena. A semi-subterranean space, this is the one monument on the hill where views to the outside world are denied. Proceeding along the avenue, an inauguration party would glimpse the tombs of the ancestral kings and queens of Tara through the gaps on the right-hand side. To the east, is Skreen, the mirror kingship of Tara, where those who break the taboos of kingship or fail to live up to the principle of the ideal justice of a ruler may be relegated.

On the subject of Tara, I know the claim is made that significant archaeological discoveries are the positive result of infrastructural initiatives like this motorway project. This is undeniably true. But when we contemplate the destructive nature of excavation, there are times when we also have to take into account the fact that collateral damage to the cultural resource significantly outweighs the knowledge gained.

Why are we unwilling to admit the obvious? I suspect we avoid the definition of excavation as destruction because it allows us to downplay its significance and it allows us to condone necessary short-cuts. It allows us to put the need for publication on the long finger. Most importantly perhaps, it allows us to tailor professional practice to the demands of others.

When it comes to the question of publication, the University Departments of Archaeology bear some accountability: all or almost all of the blameworthy practitioners are graduates whose training has clearly failed to include a strong professional ethic. In this regard, an ethical deficit has developed in Irish archaeology. But is more than a question of professional ethics. Archaeology is scholarship, it is about understanding the past. If it is an activity funded by public monies, as it invariably is, it is also about communication. The writing and communicating involved in publication is thinking—and thinking leads to understanding.

What has the Institute of Archaeologists of Ireland to say on the matter of publication?

‘Members shall fully support the principal (sic) of facilitating the dissemination of the archaeological results gathered during the course of a commission or project. In particular ... a member shall facilitate the production of the *Excavations Bulletin*’!

This clarion call, to ‘support a principle’ and to facilitate the *Excavations Bulletin* is about as minimal a stance as might be adopted. It comes as no surprise therefore to find the word ‘publication’ simply does not figure anywhere in what is described as the first edition of the Institute’s Code of Conduct for Archaeological Excavation produced in 2006.

Compare this to the declaration in the former Irish Association of Professional Archaeologists’ Code of Practice formulated in 1998 and published in 2000:

‘Adequate reports on all projects should be prepared and made accessible to the archaeological community as a whole with the minimum delay through appropriate conventional and/or electronic publishing media ...’.

One could be forgiven for thinking that the profession is going backwards.

To turn to an area where it might go forward. Research excavations are systematically inspected—but no others in a systematic way. It is evident there are extremely high standards in most quarters—so the profession in general has nothing to fear but a lot to gain from quality control.

If the Heritage Service is unwilling to enforce regulation, then the profession has to initiate a process of independent regulation itself. A regulatory regime, a measure of quality control, will protect the independence of the archaeologist. It will strengthen the profession. My remarks are of course aimed particularly at those in positions of responsibility—these, the higher management, are the people whose professional responsibility it is to maintain standards. As we shall see when I turn to education, the Universities and their Departments of Archaeology have been subject to a measure of quality review for many years. Why not other areas of the archaeological profession such as excavation?

## **Teaching**

We have been spared—so far—the ‘grade inflation’ that has plagued some American universities. When an institution needs to attract and retain students in a competitive market, intellectual standards are likely to be compromised. The production of high grades because of market forces neatly illustrates the fact that these forces are not always a benign influence. In this commodification of knowledge the market can decide what is scholarship and the independent voice can be compromised. There is a pressing need to establish and maintain a clear balance between the pursuit of learning (the generation and dissemination of knowledge that is the role of the university) and the obligation to provide a service to society and the economy.

Just as the traditional universities' collegial approach to management is often perceived as alien to industry and government, the traditional pursuit of truth and knowledge as an essential contribution to contemporary society is often considered an expensive luxury today.

Archaeology still has the goal of illuminating aspects of our common humanity. This objective is just one of many links between its various practitioners whether in the library or in the field. Though rarely articulated, it is shared by archaeologists in both the university world and in the commercial sphere.

Therefore the dumbing down of archaeological practice does everyone a disservice. This happens when university teaching and research fails to attain the highest standards. It occurs when academic fatalism produces an unquestioning acceptance of the contemporary condition. It happens when market forces are allowed to dictate what subjects are taught and what should go to the wall.

It happens when the State regulatory body decides that the assessment of academic qualifications should no longer be a part of the excavation licensing process and thereby reduces the complex challenge of systematic excavation to a routine craft. Excavation is not just the acquisition of data, it is—or should be—an analytical programme that from beginning to end is a part of a considered research strategy. There is no way an individual's competence to formulate this sort of strategy—from the identification of initial research problems to the interpretation and dissemination of the results—can be assessed without analyzing the calibre of their professional education.

The calibre of the professional education of an archaeologist, up to and beyond University level, is something we have to be acutely aware of as the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) begins to address professional accreditation in areas such as archaeology.

The same reductionist approach to a complex issue is apparent in the growing advocacy—under the inevitable pressures of market forces—for the grading of archaeological sites and monuments in terms of assumed importance. The daft supposition here is that these sites are the same as architectural remains, readily understood and objectively classified. They are not and most archaeological

classifications are little more than convenient labels of limited value concealing enormous gaps in our knowledge on both a regional and a national level.

To study an extinct society on the basis of its material remains is to engage in a set of very specialized procedures. Some of these are the unique property of archaeology. We use particular techniques and on a time-scale unlike that of any other subject. To quote Richard Bradley (as long ago as 1994): 'The uniqueness of archaeology lies in this distinctive combination of a methodology that is proper to its own pursuits and more general theories that are not its prerogative at all. Those may extend from evolutionary or ecological theory to structuralism and the history of art'.

The Universities have had a system of extern examiners for many years now. The purpose is to maintain standards and a parity of excellence between Universities in this country and abroad. It is a system that works. That is why claims of grade inflation need to be critically examined. Examiners' reports are circulated and carefully considered. I recall in England seeing a mildly critical comment in a report in one Department of Archaeology prompting quite a careful and detailed scrutiny of the issue at hand by both the University Faculty administration and the Department itself. Examiners are very conscious of their professional standing and the importance of the task they undertake, and, in my experience, are quite prepared to distribute praise or criticism as required. In the past we, in Galway, have had archaeological externs such as Professor Richard Bradley (Reading), Professor Barry Cunliffe (Oxford), Professor Jim Mallory (Queens) and currently Professor Chris Scarre (Durham).

The Universities have also been the subject of quality review and quality assessment for over a decade. The Department of Archaeology in NUI, Galway, has been reviewed twice in the last ten years, most recently last year. The assessors' report is available to all on the University web page. This is peer review of research, teaching, examining, administration, and other resources.

Staff, students and administrators are interviewed. It is not always an enjoyable event.

It is not confined to the inner workings of the Department, the Department's interaction with the wider University is also scrutinized. Specific taught programmes may also be the subject of special review. Our MA in Landscape Archaeology will probably be reviewed soon, this will involve independent external reviewers assessing objectives, course content, teaching and contact hours, resources, learning outcomes and student satisfaction.

If University archaeology is subject to quality control, why not other areas of the profession? Given the State's failure in this regard, it is surely time for the Institute to move beyond guidelines and to consider how a culture of best practice might be enforced and to consider the question of independent regulation. Self regulation is no regulation. We know that any departure from high professional standards in one area diminishes us all.

I do not believe that the wider world of developers and politicians has any clear understanding of the significance of archaeology and the fact that it is an intellectual pursuit that illuminates aspects of our common humanity and has meaningful statements to make on past lives and cultures. They certainly have little appreciation of the vulnerability of our archaeological heritage and the fact that it is a rapidly dwindling resource. It is finite, fragile and diminishing. Here is another challenge for the profession.

How do we convince developers and others that the money spent on archaeological mitigation is for the common good? The *Foresight* study rightly emphasized the need to shift focus from the generation of information to the creation and dissemination of knowledge. But does that development sector have any understanding of what the creation of knowledge means in terms of enhancing the quality of life or enriching Irish society?

Somehow the wider world needs to understand that safe-guarding the archaeological heritage is not just about protecting tourist attractions. One of the benefits of a shared heritage is the pride it fosters, the sense of place it offers, and the role it has in promoting social cohesion.

Here the engagement of the profession as a whole with the wider public is worth examining. In NUI, Galway, the relationship of the University to its public is considered important (which is why we run Diplomas in Archaeology in various localities). The rest of the archaeological profession has obligations to the wider communities as well. After all it their heritage too. Other codes of ethics and practice in archaeology and codes of professional bodies in different countries contain reference to obligations to different groups in society (local, indigenous, general public etc). I note that the IAI code does not.

A recently published work of travel literature by an Irish author (Shane Brennan, *In the Tracks of the Ten Thousand: a tale of a journey in 2000 retracing the steps of the army of Cyrus the Younger in 401 BC*) contained (at first glance) the unremarkable statement 'a historian studies documents to get some insight and an archaeologist digs holes'. The statement was not a joke, the author was trying to explain to a journalist in Baghdad what he was trying to do. But think about it—this is not parity of esteem—study in one profession, mere digging in the other. If this is what our politicians and developers' believe archaeology to be (in addition, of course, to being an expensive impediment to progress), and if it in any way represents a wider public perception, then we all have a problem. The public has to be engaged with archaeology in a much more informed and thoughtful way. This is something that some of contributors might consider this weekend as well.