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Creating the canon

The integral role of writing in archaeology

Writing about archaeology is the archaeologist's most lasting contribution to society. In less than two hundred years, archaeology has fundamentally changed most people's understanding of the human past and the way in which many of us view ourselves. It has made vital contributions to our consciousness of who we are and where we are. In the long term, however, this has been accomplished not merely by the excavations, field surveys and variety of analyses that are usually thought of as the core of archaeological endeavour but by the presentation of such work and its results in one or another published form. As Joyce et al. (2002: 6–7), citing Walter Taylor (1948: 34–35) and James Deetz (1988: 15–20), have pointed out, the very word 'archaeology' covers two different activities, in which 'the writing of archaeology [is] as integral to the production of archaeological knowledge as encounters in the field'. Indeed, the discipline of archaeology consists of the body of published material that has been built up by many thousands of writers, many of whom are now dead, creating a massive data base from which we can

retrieve information and which we constantly augment, correct and revise. This data base constitutes the archaeological ‘canon’, meaning neither a misspelled antiquated weapon nor a member of the Christian clergy but a generally recognized body of publications that are central to research and teaching in our discipline and that form a material expression of its scholarship.

Therefore it is the creation and continual expansion of this archaeological canon that should be the major objectives for practitioners of the discipline. For this reason, the necessity for archaeologists to publish their work has long been widely accepted. An early exponent of this view was the exemplary publicist Pitt Rivers (1898: 28), who famously stated, ‘A discovery dates only from the time of the record of it, and not from the time of its being found in the soil’. More recently, White (1983: 171) trenchantly insisted, ‘Research which is not available for others to use does not exist... If you do not write it down it does not exist. The converse is also true: what you report and publish is all that exists’. Consequently, it is hardly surprising that publication has become an essential element in career building for professional archaeologists, particularly those working in the academic sector. As with other disciplines, the ‘publish or perish’ syndrome is widespread, sometimes resulting in more haste than care and the risk of an outcome that might be described as ‘publish *and* perish’!

As an academic archaeologist with a long career in research and teaching, I have been writing about my subject for more than fifty years, although regrettably only in English – though sometimes translated by others, into Japanese (1993a), German (2006), and French (2008). My first published item was in 1954, at the age of nineteen, although the obscurity of the outlet has long protected me from subsequent embarrassment (Connah 1954). Since then I have been the author of research monographs (Connah 1975, 1981a, 1996a, 2007, 2009); and general syntheses (1987, 1988, 1993b, 2001a), an editor or collaborating author of specific site studies (1997, Connah, Rowland and Oppenheimer 1978) and the author of an introductory ‘popular’ text (2004a, 2006, 2008). In addition, I have written some hundreds of journal papers, notes, book reviews and other minor items, some of the journal papers in collaboration with other writers. Furthermore,

I have edited two monographs (1983, 1998), founded a journal that I edited for seven issues (1983–1988, 1996b), been an assistant editor of another journal for three issues (1971–1973) and refereed many papers for a variety of journals in a number of countries. This review of my own writing career is not mere egotism. Rather, it is provided as evidence that by now I should have learnt a little about archaeological writing, but in fact it has been a long and hard road, at times steep, rough and beset with accident black spots. Many contemporaries, including some more productive and more distinguished than me, would I suspect admit to a similar experience.

For most of us, these problems were particularly severe during the earliest part of our careers, and when talking to younger colleagues, engaged in postgraduate research or in their first posts, I constantly hear remarks about how difficult they find the writing process. As many editors would concede, there are also some archaeologists who are further advanced in their careers who nevertheless have similar problems, although they often refuse to admit them. As for the real beginners, such as undergraduates engaged in third- or fourth-year studies, there are even those who seem to think that ‘the archaeology is fun [frankly, I have never found it so] if only one did not have to write about it as well’.

Yet, as already indicated, writing about archaeology is an inseparable and central part of the archaeologist’s task. As Anthony Sinclair has put it, ‘Archaeologists, like anthropologists, write; we create our subject’ (Sinclair 1989: 161). To be able to do this successfully, it is not enough for us to understand the often highly complex archaeological data and be able to present, analyse and interpret it in an orderly manner; we must also learn how to write; specifically, we must learn how to write about archaeology. The immediate difficulty is that there are so many ways of doing this. Not only will individual approaches to the task often differ but the task itself will also vary depending on the character of the subject matter and on the purpose and intended readership of what is being written. Furthermore, the ways that archaeologists have written about their subject have changed over time and will continue to change. There are distinct genres of archaeological writing that constitute more than variations in

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literary style, reflecting as they do the cultural background and theoretical stance of the writers, as well as the character of the content.

However, the central problems of archaeological writing are also familiar to writers of history and probably to writers in other disciplines. As long ago as the sixteenth century Girolamo Cardano, natural philosopher, medical man and astrologer, as well as a practising historian, wrote,

It is very hard to write history, and it is therefore rare. First of all, because of the need for skill and style and practice; second, because of that for diligence and effort in chasing down the smallest points; third, because of that for judgement. (Translated by Grafton 2007: 183 from the Latin original.)

Cardano's perceptive remarks would apply equally to modern archaeological writing as to historical writing. He correctly identified the conflicting requirements of such writing: the need to write well, the need to include all the relevant data (of which too much will bore the reader but too little will leave the reader in ignorance) and the need to analyse and interpret the data. It is the task of balancing these obligations that often makes writing about archaeology so problematic. The need to provide both detailed technical information or theoretical content, and extended discussion of alternative interpretations, can make it extremely difficult to write prose that is understandable, readable and interesting to the reader. A slight familiarity with archaeological literature will suggest that some writers do not bother to try. The result can be publications that even students of the discipline find incomprehensible, except for some who mistakenly conclude that this must be the required way to do things and attempt to imitate it in their own work.

Closely associated with other social sciences, archaeology is one of the principal means of investigating changes in human societies through time, particularly for pre-literate societies and undocumented aspects of literate ones. It provides a time-depth and an orientation largely denied to cultural or social anthropology and sociology. However, unlike historians, whose task in explaining the recorded past is to turn written documents or oral tradition into text, archaeologists have to turn physical evidence consisting of things and their contexts into text (although

sometimes aided by documentary sources for later periods). Furthermore, except in the most specialized technical writing, that physical evidence has to be translated into text that is informative about people in the past and relevant to people in the present. This means that archaeological writing has to address special problems that arise from the character of its data, in addition to explaining its interpretations within the general context of the social sciences. Binford (1988: 19–20) suggested that we ‘think of archaeological facts as a sort of untranslated language, something that we need to “decode” in order to move from simple statements about matter and its arrangement to statements of behavioral interest about the past’. The varied and frequently complex contributions of the natural sciences to archaeological investigations can make this task especially difficult, but the process of decryption involves not only interpretation of the evidence but also the presentation of the outcome in clearly written prose. Illustrations of many types, as well as tables, can contribute to this writing, providing visual explanation and relieving the text of some of the more burdensome details. However, illustrations and tables need to be closely integrated with that text, rather than merely used as cosmetic additions as is sometimes the case. Their photographic or graphic quality, their comprehensibility, their content, their sizes, their location within the text and their captions will all need very careful attention if they are to assist effectively in the task of writing.

Writing archaeology for publication is a skill that has to be learned. Acquiring proficiency is not a magical outcome of writing a doctoral thesis as some people seem to think, although the discipline of producing such a large formal text can certainly provide an initial apprenticeship. Basically, learning to write is rather like learning to ride a bicycle; one has to maintain a delicate balance whilst still moving forward, but at first one will frequently fall off, sometimes with painful results. When this happens, it is essential to try again immediately, even though writing, like riding a bicycle, can often result in little more than a sore bum. In short, one way to learn how to write is to write. Writing has to become a habit, with a strictly disciplined routine. Repeated attempts, in as wide a variety of formats as possible, will in time make the task easier for most people and, it is hoped, improve the quality of the product. In the process, one has to

develop an objective critical approach to what has been written, attempting to read it as if someone else wrote it. Nevertheless, it is important not to be too critical. Many years ago, when an architectural historian friend of mine had laboured for several days writing a paper, I asked him how he was getting on. 'Nearly finished' was the reply, to which I remarked that he had done well to write a paper so quickly. 'No', he exclaimed, 'I have not nearly finished the paper; I have nearly finished the first paragraph!' Self-criticism is all very well, providing that it does not become self-destructive perfectionism. To quote a favourite maxim of Thurstan Shaw's: 'The better is often the enemy of the good'.

Another way to learn how to write about archaeology is to read what others have written, and to read as widely as possible amongst both archaeological and non-archaeological literature. Such reading should also range through time, certainly over the last two centuries and perhaps earlier. The important thing to observe is not only the content but also the manner in which it has been presented: the structure and style, particularly the way the prose flows or fails to do so, the way that descriptive material has been handled, the choice of words, the presence or absence of clarity. If you can understand what some authors have done that made them successful and what others have done or not done that detracted from the quality of their writing, then you can more readily appreciate the strengths and weaknesses of your own writing. This is not to suggest that you should imitate the way in which others have written, but you should certainly be prepared to learn from them. As Leonardo da Vinci stated in his view of science, 'Experience has been the mistress of whoever has written well' (Richter 1952: 2).

This book was written at the suggestion of Simon Whitmore, formerly a commissioning editor with Cambridge University Press. It resulted from an informal discussion that the two of us had at the 2005 York conference of the (American) Society for Historical Archaeology. I had stated that, unlike many archaeologists, I actually enjoyed writing, mainly because it is so difficult to do well and because the attempt to meet that challenge is stimulating in itself. I think that we both agonized about what Brian Fagan (2006a: 17), with enviable directness, has subsequently called 'the generally appalling standards of writing in

archaeology'. In any event, the outcome was that I found myself trying to write a book that tells other people how to write about archaeology. This I regard as a virtually impossible task, as well as being conceptually arrogant. I also felt poorly qualified to write anything that looked like a methodological manual. Instead, I have written a book that reflects my own experiences of writing about archaeology (on related themes see Connah 2001b, 2004b, 2004c). It presents a personal view intended to be read, rather than a reference work intended to be consulted.

On the overall craft of writing there are, of course, many books, but compared to the large literature on the writing of history (Berger, Feldner and Passmore 2003 is an example), there appears to have been little written about the writing of archaeology. Indeed, in his admirable recent book, *Writing archaeology: Telling stories about the past*, Brian Fagan comments, 'There is almost no directly relevant literature' on this subject (Fagan 2006a: 168). Fagan does, in fact, provide a 'how to do it' book, but he concentrates on the writing of commercial general interest books, what he calls 'trade books', an area of publication in which he has been remarkably successful. My intention has been to cast my net very much wider, to encompass as much of the spectrum of archaeological writing as possible.

I have been aided in this task by the opinions of other archaeologists. Hodder (1989), for instance, has rightly argued that a more critical attention should be given to archaeological writing and has suggested that rhetoric, narrative and dialogue need more emphasis in such writing. Taking up these ideas, Joyce et al. (2002) have delved deeply into the theoretical aspects of archaeological writing, stressing what they perceive to be a need for innovation and experimentation. In addition, Joyce (2006) has written specifically about the writing of historical archaeology, and several papers on the theme of writing archaeology occupy most of an issue of the *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* (Writing archaeology 1989). Amongst other contributions on the subject of archaeological writing is that of Chippindale (1996), who has provided an interesting analysis of a paper of his own, identifying different 'moods' of writing that reflect different kinds of knowledge that it was hoped to convey. There is also a paper by Pluciennik (1999), with comments by others, that examines the role of narrative in archaeological writing. Furthermore, Betty

(2002) has provided a publisher's view of archaeological writing, and Jones et al. (2001) have contributed a useful survey concerning the publication of archaeological projects. As well as these sources, there is a general guide to scholarly publishing (Derricourt 1996a, 1996b) that deserves particular attention by archaeological writers because its author was an academic archaeologist before he became a publisher.

In addition to these varied published sources, I also hoped to gather a range of opinion in the form of personal communications from a selection of colleagues who had substantial experience of writing for publication. My optimism was not justified; a total of twenty-two written requests for comments on the subject produced only two responses. Apparently, writing about archaeology was not considered to be a matter of importance, or perhaps it was feared that I would quote what they had to say. However, Merrick Posnansky did respond and expressed the opinion that standards of archaeological writing had declined in recent decades, whereas Alasdair Brooks admired some of the work of James Deetz and Ivor Noël Hume and contrasted it with the 'near-impenetrability and insomnia-curing prose' that now characterizes much archaeological writing.

It would appear that the nuts and bolts of writing about archaeology do deserve more attention than they are sometimes given. Therefore, my aim in this book is to help other archaeologists to write for publication and perhaps to write better than they might otherwise do. This goal might appear patronizing, but it is not intended to be. Inevitably, the book reflects my own personal views, rather than attempting to establish 'right' and 'wrong' ways of doing things. I neither regard my own writing as faultless, nor what I have to suggest as the only way of going about the job. After many years of university teaching and supervision, I am acutely aware that to some extent we all think differently and what works for one person might not work for another. This can be especially true for writers of diverse cultural backgrounds for whom English is a second language, particularly those from Africa and parts of Asia. For this reason the book has been written with the expectation that the reader might accept or reject its suggestions about the writing process, assuming that at least she or he will have been encouraged to think about that process, just as I have had to do in my own case. Naturally, the book raises

theoretical issues, some of which are discussed, but the main orientation is a practical one. The book is principally intended for a readership of both academic and commercial professional archaeologists, as well as for students of archaeology, and heritage managers, but I hope it will interest anyone who writes about archaeology for whatever audience. As there is no point in writing books unless someone actually reads them, particular attention is given to the difficulties of writing in an interesting and readable manner.

The purpose of archaeological writing is to make the results of our investigations widely available, primarily to other archaeologists and scholars in related disciplines but also to society in general or to specific sections of it. This means publishing what we write, a process that includes a very wide range of printed formats, a growing body of digital outlets and, in the opinion of some people, even the so-called grey literature that has mushroomed in recent decades with the growth of archaeological consulting in much of the developed world. Therefore, the archaeological author needs to keep in mind the published form in which the writing will eventually appear. This means that, in addition to considering the craft of archaeological writing, it is also necessary to give close attention to the process of publication in its varied forms. Hence the emphasis in this book is on the archaeological author; the primary definition of the latter word in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary* is 'a writer, esp[ecially] of books', implying that an author is someone who writes specifically for publication (Allen 1990: 72).

As already indicated, there are many types of publications. Conventional printed hard copy is still very common and, for many authors, remains the most desirable form. Consisting of a mind-numbing variety of books and journals, from the most esoteric research items to those intended for general audiences, it is costly and slow to produce and often poorly distributed. The acquisition and shelving of copies also involve considerable expense for both libraries and individuals. Not surprisingly, some authors see digital publication on the Internet as the solution to these problems, but commercial publishers still have to charge for access and thoughtful readers inevitably wonder about information plasticity and archival sustainability. For example,

one can read a book printed in 1908 and know that one is reading exactly what was published at that time, but will people in 2108 be able to read a book published in a digital form in 2008 with the same assurance? Will there even be compatible hardware and software available? As the head of the British Library has warned, 'We are in danger of creating a black hole for future historians and writers' (Brindley 2009), and consequently there has been increasing concern about the preservation of digital material (Borghoff et al. 2005; Harvey 2005; Pearson and Webb 2008). Finally, there is the grey literature, the enormous number of printed (usually photocopied) reports produced by consulting archaeologists. The problem here is availability: very few copies, a restricted circulation (in some cases limited by the client or by cultural sensitivity) and consequently a huge amount of data that is not usually accessible for general reading. Arguably, grey literature does not constitute publication at all.

Clearly, the archaeological writer has to select a publication outlet with care and is more likely to have material accepted if it has been written with that particular outlet in mind. Before even starting to write, it is important to decide what the purpose of the writing is and who are most likely to read it. The variety of publication outlets and readerships for archaeological writing is considerable, and the archaeological author needs to develop an equally varied range of styles. Inevitably there will often be a tension between the requirement for scientific rigour and the necessity to produce interesting readable prose, which for more general publication has also to be in a commercially viable form. As might be expected of a discipline that straddles the humanities and the sciences, those of us who attempt to write about it will have to tackle many problems. The next chapter will consider how other archaeologists, past and present, have addressed these problems when writing about the past.