The Birth of Modern Archaeology

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One object, perhaps more than any other, stands out for the way it changed our perception of the past. This is the handaxe from Abbeville (cat. 130) that John Evans and Joseph Prestwich collected in 1859 on a formal visit to France[1], as part of a Society delegation to adjudicate the finding of early flintwork with bones of extinct animals in gravels exposed by quarrying. On these turned the entire issue of 'deep time' and the span of human ancestry, and thereby the dismantling of the short biblical chronology and the divine-Creationist dogma. Duly observing that the flints did occur *in situ* along with animal remains, Evans and Prestwich travelled back to London to deliver their findings at a Society meeting; the artefacts themselves were on public display in the Society's rooms, placed then at Somerset House. It is interesting to note that, given the general reluctance of archaeologists to adopt the medium, the two verified their findings with a series of photographs that accompanied the paper they presented to the Society. The key point here is how an archaeological 'fact' could, at a time when there was not yet any absolute basis of scientific dating, be constructed and broadly accepted so as to have such momentous implications.

The question of how to demonstrate the secure stratigraphic association of findings of 'Early Man' was established at Brixham Cave, near Torquay in Devon, where flint tools had been found with extinct faunal remains[2]. However, it was not until the work of Lieutenant-General Pitt Rivers in the 1860s and 1870s that a formal sense of 'proof' was introduced. His background included the test demonstration of ordnance and work as a military prosecutor, so it is perhaps not surprising that he introduced the concept that archaeological evidence should be able to stand up in a court of law. Accordingly, he introduced modes of group-adjudication and cited named 'witnesses' to excavation findings[3].

The main plank on which this concept of proof rested was the vertical stratigraphic section (and the relative situation of artefacts within it). This was a concept borrowed from the field of geology in which the principles of stratification had been established during the first half of the nineteenth century[4], largely as a result of the work of William Smith (see cat. 132), whose geological map of England and Wales appeared in 1815. Also crucial was the development of the

[1] Evans 1860, pp. 208–307; Evans 1956, pp. 281–5

[2] See, for example, Gruber 1965, pp. 373–402, and van Riper 1993. Falconer, 1863, pp. 459–60.

[3] Pitt Rivers 1867, pp. lxxiv, lxxx and lxxxi; 1875, pp. 376–88, and 1883, p. 436; see also Bowden 1991, pp. 20–1, and Evans 2006, p. 966.

[4] See, for example, Gruber 1965, pp. 373–402, and van Riper 1993

new prehistoric chronology; the Three Age system (Stone, Bronze and Iron) had been established in Denmark during the first decades of the century, and provided its basic framework. It was introduced to Britain from 1846 to 1847 by the Danish archaeologist Jens Worsaae[5]. The basis of this classification was, thereafter, firmly enshrined by John Evans in his acclaimed artefact studies of the 1860s to the 1880s[6] and, too, by a series of period-specific exhibitions held by the Society in the early 1870s[7].

In the debates surrounding the 'deep time' chronology, the Society provided a stamp of authority and an 'official' marking of change. However, due largely to its antiquarian Fellowship and its diversity of specialist interests, the Society never presented a radical platform. This is most apparent in the avowedly evolutionist 'New Prehistory' of the period 1850 to 1870/80 as embraced by the circle of John Lubbock[8]. Lubbock, a Member of Parliament, was influenced by his friend Charles Darwin's theories of evolution and natural selection, and viewed the development of prehistory in terms of a lengthy biological and cultural evolution, with the 'modern European' as the end product of the process. His book *Prehistoric Times* (1865) did much to further the adoption of prehistoric chronology in Britain and was responsible for the categorisation of prehistory, dividing the Stone Age into the Palaeolithic and Neolithic eras, denoting the progression from old to new.

Although the 'New Prehistory' had many advocates among Fellows of the Society, its agenda was more vigorously advanced more within the newer, more anthropologically oriented societies of the day. During the debates leading to the introduction of the Ancient Monuments Protection Act of 1882[9], the broader, more representative agenda of the Antiquaries was overshadowed by Lubbock's emphasis on pre-history, which drew adverse comment when it was observed that in a Christian nation no medieval (i.e. Christian) monuments were afforded protection under the Act[10].

Throughout most of the nineteenth century, excavation remained essentially a matter of personal pursuit. Most serious practitioners of the time were Fellows of the Society, and they duly presented their results at its London meetings. They had something of the atmosphere of a conversazione. George Cruikshank's cartoon of 1812 (cat. 39) shows artefacts displayed, and excavation drawings unfurled, upon the enormous table that dominated the Society's meeting room[11]. It was effectively upon this great table that 'the past' was sorted, ordered and adjudicated. The face-to-face nature of this process meant that there was no clear need to illustrate these

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[5] See, for example, Evans 1956, pp. 280–1, and Levine 1986, p. 91
[6] Evans 1872 and 1881
[7] London 1873, and London 1874
[8] For example, Lubbock 1867, pp. 190–209; see also Chapman 1989, pp. 23–42, and Stocking 1987, pp. 150–6
[9] Chippindale 1983, pp. 1–55; Murray 1989, pp. 55–67
[10] Thompson 1977, p. 60
[11] Evans 2007

communications. The Antiquaries first acquired a magic lantern in 1890[12], and the meeting room was arranged as a modern lecture space as late as 1929.

Early archaeological reports published in the Society's journals are sparsely illustrated and were little more than the letter-based chronicles that were read aloud at meetings. They are intimate accounts with little sense of posterity or future value. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century did the emphasis begin to change, with the production of weighty tomes devoted to artefact studies and personal campaigns of excavation, of which Pitt Rivers's *Cranborne Chase* series (1887–98) and Canon Greenwell's *British Barrows* (1877) are prominent examples[13].

Most excavation efforts during the nineteenth century generally focused either on cemeteries or upstanding barrows that were visible and readily identifiable. Such sites generally fulfilled the desire for rich and complete artefact assemblages, which met the purposes of both display and further typological study[14]. Whatever the impulse, prior to the latter decades of the century, settlement archaeology received relatively little attention.

Here we must be wary of being blinkered by (over-) national concerns for the later nineteenth century was also an era of discoveries overseas. Fieldwork by British antiquaries in Mesopotamia, Egypt, Greece and Troy was regularly featured in the *Illustrated London News*[15]. The discoveries of great Continental prehistoric sites such as Hallstatt and La Tène were nearer at hand. Perhaps most significant was the discovery from 1853 of the Swiss prehistoric lake villages with their wealth of well-preserved, organic artefacts. The 1866 English translation of these findings[16] proved highly influential for the development of archaeology in Britain and directly inspired Bulleid and Gray's 1892–1907 excavations of the waterlogged Iron Age settlement at Glastonbury[17].

Mortimer Wheeler's 1934–37 Society-sponsored excavations at Maiden Castle, the great Iron Age hill fort at Dorchester, are justifiably highlighted here[18]. Encouraging visitors to come to the site and courting the press, Wheeler certainly intended the project to be the public flagship of its day, with the chequerboard of his hallmark 'box-grid' technique asserting the orderly and precise control of archaeological data[19].

Maiden Castle was, nonetheless, only one of a series of groundbreaking excavations sponsored by the Society during the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries. Since the

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[12] Evans 1956, p. 364
[13] Greenwell 1877; Pitt Rivers 1887, 1892
[14] Evans 2007
[15] See Bacon 1976
[16] Keller 1866
[17] Bulleid and St Gray 1911–17
[18] Wheeler 1943
[19] Lucas 2001, pp. 36–43

1850s, the Society had provided financial assistance for excavations by its Fellows[20]. The work of George E. Fox and William St John Hope at the Romano-British town of Silchester in Hampshire from 1890 to 1909 was a new departure in specialist collaboration[21]. Previously, excavations (including even those of Pitt Rivers) had been largely a matter of individual initiative involving a 'trained' director and his hired labourers, although separately authored human bone studies began to be included from the mid-nineteenth century. Under the auspices of the Society, the Silchester excavations benefited from the contributions of other Fellows with their expertise in scientific areas such as metallurgy, plant remains and animal bone studies. At Silchester the genesis of the interdisciplinary excavation projects that we know today took place.

The Geological Society had sponsored the Brixham Cave investigations (1858), and the British Association for the Advancement of Science those at Kent's Cavern, near Torquay (1865–80), but aside from these and occasional efforts by the Ministry of Works, the Society was, until the later 1930s, essentially the sole institution to fund excavations on any scale.

Its monopoly was, eventually, broken by the Prehistoric Society (founded in 1935), which sponsored the excavation of a large prehistoric settlement at Little Woodbury, thus echoing the declaration by the Peer Research Commission of 1930 (of the Society and the Congress of Archaeological Societies) that there needed to be an 'archaeology of the living' to balance the discipline's fixation with 'the dead'[22].

Led by the renowned German practitioner Gerhard Bersu, then in Britain as a refugee from the Nazis, the excavation of the Iron Age settlement at Little Woodbury near Salisbury in Wiltshire used methods that were very much at odds with Wheeler's more limited box-trenching style. Through the use of large, open-area stripping techniques that were then standard in Germany, Bersu demonstrated that the inhabitants had lived in substantial post-built roundhouses (and not the subterranean pit-dwellings that until then had held sway in the conception of British prehistory[23]). This meant that the site provided, for the first time, a convincing picture of typical later prehistoric settlement, and it was celebrated as an example of the new 'functionalism'. (Although Glastonbury had earlier provided a model of how the 'bare skeleton' of the past could be fleshed out, its marsh-side location meant that it was a rare and 'special' instance of archaeological preservation.)

To this overview of the birth of the discipline must be added one final strand: Grahame Clark's investigations of early Fenland sites in the 1930s[24]. Reflecting Continental influences (in this case

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[20] Evans 1956, pp. 274, 306

[21] For example, George Fox and William St John Hope in *Archaeologia*, 54 and 57, 1895 and 1901, respectively; see also, for an overview, Boon 1974

[22] Evans 1989, p. 438

[23] Evans 1989, pp. 436–50

[24] Clark et al. 1935, pp. 283–319; see also Smith 1997, pp. 11–30

Scandinavian), Clark initiated Mesolithic ('Middle' Stone Age) studies in Britain and, through his collaboration with Harry Godwin at Peacock's Farm, near Mildenhall in Cambridgeshire, he introduced environmental sciences, such as pollen analysis, to archaeology. In the immediate post-war era, Clark, later Disney Professor of Archaeology at the University of Cambridge, expanded on this mode of overtly scientific, 'ecological' or 'economic archaeology' in his excavation of the Mesolithic lakeside site at Star Carr, near Scarborough in Yorkshire[25].

It could be argued that by 1950, modern archaeology in Britain had been born. The choice of year is not accidental, it being the conventional datum by which radiocarbon dating sets 'the present'. Within the following decade, this basis of absolute dating was itself established, and it was at that time too earthmoving machinery first began to be regularly employed, an innovation that increasingly led to larger-scale excavations. When these last components were linked with stratigraphy, a framework of artefact chronology and the application of environmental sciences – in addition to a fuller realisation of interpretative possibilities – the critical ingredients of modern archaeology could be said to have been assembled.

Yet equally they could also be considered as only secondary outcomes. Perhaps the very moment of its conception was at that evening lecture in 1859 when the Abbeville handaxes were first presented. What ensued was the acceptance of the deep ancestry of humanity, and all that it implies.

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