Interpreting Stratigraphy 1992 (Lincoln)

Introduction

by Kate Steane

These proceedings represent part of a continuing process in the attempt to understand stratigraphy. The origins of this conference echo all those who have worked with stratigraphic sequences including Edward Harris and Michael Schiffer, but I also had personal reasons for initiating this forum for open debate in Lincoln which I shall attempt to explain.

As one of the post-exavation field officers with the City of Lincoln Archaeology Unit, I work on the stratigraphy of backlog sites. Strong emphasis is laid here on the necessity of integration of stratigraphy with pottery and other finds and therefore I have attended several pottery and small finds meetings (MPRG, SEMPER, SFRG). The lively debate engendered by the meeting of these specialists is always impressive, both during formal discussion time as well as in the pub! After one such meeting it occurred to me that I had never presented or discussed my own work in open debate. I knew Tim Williams (monitor for the Lincoln post-exavation project) had a strong interest in the stratigraphic issues and discussed with him the possibility of holding a small informal meeting. He suggested several people who might like to be involved; these I approached at the IFA conference (April 1992). Here Jez Reeve drew my attention to ‘Arch-Form’, a group which had been active a couple of years ago but was now defunct. A call for papers was sent to those known to be interested in stratigraphy (apologies to anyone who did not hear). From being a small group, the number of people interested grew to over 120 and the venue had to be moved to a larger hall. I found it a very exciting experience being surrounded by people who were all involved in similar work. It was also very challenging as I found we all had different perceptions and expectations of the stratigraphy. The day taught me a lot and I was also relieved to have some of my unvoiced thoughts expressed by others. Since then I have found some of the ideas presented very useful for my own work with the Lincoln backlog.

The papers in this volume are presented in the order in which they were given; the texts are largely unedited as I felt that the papers should be published much as they were sent to me (which explains the different methods of referencing).

Abstracts from this conference

Dalwood, H

The Use of Soil Micromorphology for Investigating Site Formation Processes

Soil micromorphology can be used to detect different natural and anthropogenic processes which contribute towards a site’s formation. This is of particular significance when attempting to interpret deposits which otherwise appear extensive and uniform, for example ‘dark earth’ deposits. Dalwood examines the contribution of soil micromorphology to the interpretation of Roman and post-Roman sites in Worcester.

McAdam, E

Discussion Session: feedback mechanisms from post-exavation to excavation

This short paper summarises a discussion session which dealt with the artificial distinction between excavation and post-exavation. Closer integration between the two is called for, and the necessity of transferring staff between different areas of post-exavation and fieldwork is highlighted.
Malt, D and Westman, A

Assessment versus Analysis

MAP2 (English Heritage 1991) makes the distinction between ‘assessment’ at phase 3 of a project, and ‘analysis’ at phase 4. In this paper, Malt and Westman argue that, whilst this may be appropriate for the post-excavation treatment of finds and environmental material, it is not so applicable to stratigraphy. The problems of implementing MAP2 at MoLAS are examined.

Adams, M

Stratigraphy after Harris: some questions

The Harris matrix is now enshrined in archaeological recording and analysis. Adams argues that, whilst the matrix provides the essence of stratigraphic analysis, the processes through which the matrix is determined are implicit and unstated. He highlights the nature of the standard matrix as a tool for graphical display, but one which fails to denote the concepts between the boxes and lines.

Clark, P

Contrasts in the Recording and Interpretation of ‘Rural’ and ‘Urban’ Stratification

Methodologies for urban excavation have been discussed and enhanced over several decades. Rural excavation practices have not received such close scrutiny. Clark calls for a flexible response to meet the recording needs of different archaeological stratigraphies.

Yule, B

Truncation Horizons and Reworking in Urban Stratigraphy

The emphasis placed on stratigraphic relationships has reduced the perceived significance of physical relationships. Yule discusses the evidence from Winchester Palace, Southwark, suggesting that consideration of physical relationships would allow recognition of truncation and reworking in urban deposits, thereby indicating periods for which the stratigraphy has been lost.

Hutcheson, A

Interpretation of the Formation Processes of One Context on the North Downs in Kent

This paper discusses the problems of excavation and interpretation of an extensive and seemingly homogeneous deposit. Difficulties arose with the identification of cut features, lenses containing whole pottery vessels and a substantial ceramic assemblage. The pressure of a short-term rescue excavation prevented detailed fieldwork, thereby limiting analytical potential in post-excavation. Hutcheson concludes by presenting suggestions as to how more useful data may be collected from homogenous deposits under pressured circumstances in the field.

Roskams, S

Finds Context and Deposit Status

Roskams discusses the dissociation of finds and field evidence, a situation which he ascribes partly to organisational structures and partly to the divorce of theory from practice. When finds and field data are studied in conjunction, the ‘status’ of a deposit is often determined from physical characteristics, and divided usually into ‘primary’ or ‘secondary’. Roskams suggests that this is too simplistic, and defines status as a relational property, of which many types exist.
Davies, B

*Spot Dates as Qualitative Data?*

Davies uses evidence from various Roman sites in London to suggest how basic preliminary spot dates from ceramics may be integrated to reach substantial interpretations of the archaeology of a particular topographic area for a given period.

Steane, K

*Reinterpretation: thoughts from the backlog*

The examination of more than 40 backlog sites excavated in Lincoln presented difficulties to the team re-interpreting the sites several years later. Emphasis was placed on integration between the original records and ceramic and other finds evidence. Steane concludes that this integration has only been possible with the advantages of computer technology.