Assessment versus Analysis

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Introduction
In our session we led a general discussion instead of presenting well-prepared papers and, in taking the present welcome opportunity to write what we wanted to say, we have had the benefit of that discussion, for which we are very grateful. We should of course add that the views expressed here are our own and are not to be regarded as those of the Museum of London Archaeology Service (MOLAS) nor necessarily of anyone else.

The title ‘Assessment versus Analysis’ refers to an important distinction made in English Heritage's document Management of Archaeological Projects, 2nd edition (universally abbreviated to MAP2), which puts forward a model for managing individual archaeological projects. This model identifies five ideal phases in the life of a project: preliminary assessment the explicit formulation of archaeological aims, the ‘research design’, essential to every project (Phase 1); fieldwork and the creation of a site archive of records, finds and environmental materials (Phase 2); ‘assessment of potential for analysis’ of the contents of a site archive, presented in an ‘assessment report’ (Phase 3); analysis, research and preparation of reports for publication (Phase 4); dissemination of reports (Phase 5). The model recommends applying a managerial cycle of explicitly documented review, proposal and decision whenever a project comes to the end of a phase, although not every project is expected to go through all five phases. We focussed our discussion on the distinction between ‘assessment’ and ‘analysis’ entailed by the procedural separation of Phases 3 and 4, and the implications of this distinction for post-exavcation work on stratigraphic records.

We would like to say at once that the MAP2 model for managing archaeological projects is welcome and timely: who could argue with its emphasis on competence and efficiency? Promulgation of this model, incidentally, shouldn't be taken to imply that previously archaeologists were unusually deficient in management skills. We also think it important to note what MAP2 does not make recommendations about: the human factor in work - vital to good and effective management; professional techniques and methods - equally vital of course; and, more difficult to express, exactly what constitutes archaeological value for effort and money spent - will we all recognise the same qualities when we see them? Moreover, very properly, no one claims that MAP2 is the last word on the subject.

Interpreting and implementing MAP2
MOLAS took up the invitation in the preface to MAP2, adapting this model of project management to its own circumstances. A MOLAS working party was set up to interpret and implement the MAP2 model, producing an initial document just in time for us to be able to brandish it at Lincoln. This first MOLAS document deals more thoroughly than was possible in MAP2 with the contents of a site archive and their post-exavcation assessment, further details being left to supporting technical specifications and manuals such as the Museum of London's Archaeological Site Manual (1990) and other documents dealing with interpreting stratigraphic records as well as collecting and processing finds and environmental materials.

The MOLAS specifications for a site archive endorse what was the previous best practice, amounting to everything one should have completed by the end of fieldwork. Stratigraphic and other site records would therefore include a Site Plan - locating areas of excavation, sections and so on internally, and connecting these to the external world, to a uniform degree of accuracy - and a fully checked and completed stratigraphic matrix. Finds would not have to be spot-dated at this stage. Environmental samples should already have been chosen on site from well-sealed contexts, likely to be closely dated and to yield useful information. A summary of results and an index catalogue the site archive, making it accessible.

Although not new these specifications for a site archive are highly important, for no amount of sophisticated post-exavcation work - or management -
can possibly compensate for the absence of an explicit research design, bad fieldwork or poor recording.

Post-excavation 'debriefing'
According to the MOLAS working party the next stages in the life of a project are a 'debriefing', followed by whatever work is necessary to produce a post-excavation assessment report, all equivalent to MAP2's Phase 3.

Presumably managers (or field officers) and site supervisors (or directors) have always thought they knew what they were doing and why. A debriefing directly after fieldwork is what the former archaeological departments did anyway, whether by that name or not, in order to review the results of fieldwork, to decide what to do next and to plan ahead. This is managerial review, proposal and decision, in MAP2's terms, and in a MOLAS-style debriefing a project manager, site supervisor and specialists do this quickly, ideally with a project's research design on the table in front of them. Although the research design governs what happens next it can of course be changed, provided this is done in an open, reasoned and explicit way. Work in post-excavation, like work at any time, has in any case to be defined, estimated, costed and timetabled. These basic managerial tasks are nothing new, the Museum's former departments for example having done them - with more or less efficiency - for more than three hundred projects in the four years 1988-91.

Most projects at present are only evaluations: limited fieldwork for the purpose of making an archaeological evaluation as part of the local authority planning process. In these cases the purpose of a debriefing is mainly to plan the work of compiling the requisite evaluation report, the decision to do so having already been taken, and post-excavation work therefore doesn't correspond exactly to any of MAP2's Phases 3, 4 or 5. In different circumstances, perhaps when a project is resurrected and more fieldwork takes place some time after an initial evaluation, a debriefing would correspond in part at least to an 'assessment of potential for analysis'.

Post-excavation 'assessment'
At this rate 'assessment' must seem like a word in danger of severe abuse, so it's worth saying that we take it to mean primarily an intellectual act of judgement that one may perform at any time. In this sense one could begin much of an 'assessment of potential' while fieldwork was progressing: for example, making an 'assessment of potential for publication', in a preliminary way at least, by deciding what to photograph on site. MAP2 employs the term 'assessment' to mean both an act - a judgement of this kind presented in the form of an assessment report - and a process, leading up to this judgement.

Assessment as an act of judgement usually depends on some prior mental activity that we would call analysis, although we don't particularly care what names are given to human cerebrations so long as they don't mislead, cause mistakes and waste effort. It is clear to us that the MAP2 model's strict separation of analysis from assessment is all about procedure rather than semantics: ensuring that a considered judgement is fairly made about the value of proposed post-excavation work before embarking on it, especially if it's time-consuming and expensive. Value is defined as what will answer questions in the research design and should therefore be published.

No one would argue with any of this, as a matter of management. Most site archives would be assessed in MAP2's terms, individually - site by site - in order to make a judgement of their value: to decide what to research in more detail and to publish. The technical processes required to make such an assessment aren't, however, as simple as the MAP2 model seems to assume. As a result the order and definition of Phases 3 and 4 in the MAP2 model are, we think, over-idealised and impractical. In this respect while the MAP2 model seems to us quite appropriate to post-excavation treatment of finds and environmental materials, which easily moves on to substantial local and regional research, it seems less appropriate to explicating and understanding the stratigraphic records of a particular site, a process which may be complicated in itself but may otherwise be limited in scope.

Phase 3 tasks
The MOLAS working party document specifies the tasks that must be accomplished - assuming that a site archive is complete and a debriefing has clarified a project's aims - to enable a proper assessment report to be written. The stratigraphic sequence should be reliably phased and dated, finds identified and dated, environmental materials identified and sorted and relevant documentary sources identified.

These indispensable tasks differ in their possible complexity. At this initial stage, work on finds and environmental materials is relatively straightforward and easy to estimate - the basic task is one of identification, usually recognising things one already knows about; but work on stratigraphic records may well be complicated and much less tractable - even the simplest structural sequence has to be proved by drawing successive phase plans, which ought not to be a matter of recognising what was already thought to be there.

'Assessing' stratigraphic records
There is little one can seriously do with stratigraphic
records, after putting them in order in a site archive, except analyse them. These days professionally-made records aren’t chewed up notebooks, scruffy little-bit-of-everything plans and hundreds of apparently repetitive photographs, whose capacity to yield useful information cannot be assumed. Stratigraphic records, especially those based on single context plans systematically made and checked during area excavation, are designed to be capable of equally systematic and reasonably quick spatial and sequential analysis. Stratigraphic excavation from the top down and post-excavation analysis from the bottom up, or rather from the beginning of a sequence onwards, are two concomitant parts of a single system.

There is no ‘degree’ of stratigraphic analysis in this respect - it’s either done or it isn’t. If it isn’t done, one has no grounds for a reliable statement of what these records mean - whatever one says could have been said during fieldwork, or even before. And if it is done, there’s no point in starting with anything larger or more interpretative than the individual contexts that were recorded, nor in omitting any contexts.

A purely provisional interpretation of a structural sequence, perhaps defining large groups of contexts before their constituent subgroups (in MOLAS terminology), has inherent defects. A provisional interpretation may be little more than a glorified guess, acceptable for the purposes of a debriefing but not to be relied upon by finds or environmental specialists for the purpose of a proper assessment.

Specific dating information should be applied to dependable groupings of contexts, rather than to provisional groups that are liable to change if more analysis is done later. Hasty conclusions as to general periodisation of a sequence - separating prehistoric, Roman, sub-Roman, Saxon, medieval and post-medieval, however such periods are to be defined - are particularly to be avoided. In any case, no one should analyse the same contexts twice: firstly, quickly, to make one set of interpretations and secondly, more slowly and in more detail, to come up with what would almost always be a different set of interpretations.

Selection of data at this early stage is undesirable, but if unavoidable - on grounds of cost, say - it would be feasible to work from the beginning of a stratigraphic sequence of contexts onwards and stop half-way, or select whole areas of a site and ignore others: the effect of this would be like that of stratigraphic truncation. Any other method of selection at this stage, before analysis, would be counter-productive, if not senseless. One would not know what was omitted, nor know the implications of these omissions for what one had decided to retain, undermining whatever interpretation was made.

Apparently well-defined urban contexts lend themselves to straightforward structural analysis. It would be a mistake, however, to accept the stratigraphic unit of record, as defined on site, at face value. In fact, as other contributors to this conference recognised, contexts aren’t always what they seem to be or were believed to be when they were defined and recorded. In tandem with purely structural analysis there should be rather more critical morphological analysis, considering formation processes and phenomena not represented directly by contexts as defined during excavation. If contexts weren’t clearly defined in the first place - as often happens, and not only on more extensive and shallow rural sites - even a purely structural analysis isn’t so easy.

The basic method of work has always been primarily graphic, dealing with plans, sections and diagrams. One has a certain repertoire of questions for different kinds of evidence, but the analytical, interpretative and organisational essentials are pretty much the same. The products are sets of working and interpretative plans at suitable scales, sequence diagrams of contexts and their interpretative groups and subgroups as appropriate, a Land Use Diagram and a comprehensive index. The only reason for writing about the stratigraphic sequence at this stage would be, we think, if the interpretative plans and diagrams weren’t sufficiently self-explanatory: sometimes the way an interpretation was worked out is more important than the solution. If explanations can be verbal, less has to be written down, although the risks in this are obvious.

The MOLAS working party expected that this indispensable post-exca evation work on stratigraphic records would be carefully phased with other work on finds and environmental materials - exchanging an initial scheme of phasing from ‘strat’ on one hand and spot dates from ‘finds’ on the other, for example - leading to well-considered interpretations and a definitive phasing to which an assessment report can refer.

As people - and units - gain more experience these analytical processes should be performed with more confidence, efficiency and economy. They could be streamlined, concentrating on areas of interest (briefly) and on areas of difficulty (even more briefly), but only up to a certain point. Many factors helping or hindering this work are external to actual method and technique.

Types of record and types of site
As mentioned already, we’ve always had to make estimates for post-excavation work, deciding what is to be done and how long it should take. We have refined our calculations in so far as we expect less work to be done in MAP2’s Phase 3 than was done previously to compile a ‘Level III archive report’, although the results should be of comparable utility.
One can consider ways of estimating the likely difficulty or lengthiness of stratigraphic analysis, combining an appreciation of the type of site and the state of the site archive.

A rural site with extensive but relatively shallow and uncomplicated stratification ought to be understood and phased with much less work than an urban site with complex and deep stratification, although in the former case specific dating information from finds might be necessary to establish any sort of sequence. The state of the stratigraphic records is another variable, reflecting what we could call the efficiency with which the original data were recorded. Again, at its simplest, a series of sections might be an efficient way of recording the stratification of the rural site but very inefficient for the urban site, assuming also adequate finds collection and environmental sampling.

Simple estimates for post-excavation work could be in three logical categories: easy, difficult, and the in-between. We should mention that a current English Heritage-funded project has developed this idea and is applying it to existing site archives, a backlog of unpublished or semi-published projects in London, to enable estimates to be made consistently for subsequent work on them.

The research archive

The MAP2 model seems very suited to a single site that stands alone as a project. This model obviously has to be adapted and clarified to fit the situation in which large urban units operate, where sites arise according to the dictates of modern development, few sites are archaeologically self-contained and everything produced in MAP2's Phases 3 and 4 forms a component part of a single cumulative multi-site multi-project research archive. The principles of the Frere and Cunliffe Reports, precursors of MAP2, were adapted to this situation so that all data from every site was processed to a certain level of interpretation and accessibility ('Level III'), and disseminated publication thereafter ('Level IV') could be more selective. The same principles ought to operate still, at least to the extent that site data is catalogued, digested and an informed decision may be made about what to publish and how.

Taking the MAP2 model further, the process of Phase 3, when complete, would mark the end of work on an individual site archive, and the ensuing Phase 3 assessment report would mark the site's integration into its geographical and historical surroundings - and a unit's publication policy. From this stage on projects would be redefined and possibly their ingredients recombined in research and publication projects.

Premature selection or partial treatment of data in MAP2's Phase 3 is, we suggest, worse than not recovering data in Phase 2, it would vitiate the usefulness of what further work one allowed oneself to do in Phases 4 and 5. The MAP2 model says, crudely, 'No analysis in Phase 3'. We say, 'Do whatever is technically necessary - including analysis - to assess site data reliably, or all further work is flawed.'