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

by Peter R Clark

I have used the terms ‘Rural’ and ‘Urban’ in the title not to imply any fundamental difference between the strata encountered in the town as opposed to the country, but rather as a shorthand for a historical separation of the methodological approach employed by practitioners in different environments. ‘Urban’ archaeologists are often confronted with complex, deeply stratified deposits with enormous logistical problems in terms of numbers of artefacts and stratigraphic units, often exacerbated by severe financial and time constraints. ‘Rural’ archaeologists often deal with quite shallow stratification, over large areas and with comparatively few artefacts, but with major problems of depositional and post-depositional processes to take into account when excavating, recording and interpreting their sites. This, of course, is an oversimplification, and any number of exceptions may be described; however, I trust that this simplistic model will be allowed for the purposes of discussion.

The work I am currently involved with requires the co-ordination of field teams working throughout Kent on every kind of site from early prehistoric rural sites to deeply stratified urban environments such as Dover and Canterbury. A field team may be working on a Neolithic/Early Bronze Age site buried under colluvium and with severe problems of post-depositional change one week, and then move to a deeply stratified urban site truncated by later intrusions and with major problems of residuality the next. Training staff and articulating the relationship between on-site recording and effective postexcavation analysis have highlighted these issues of excavation and post-excavation methodology.

Our urban excavations are now undertaken using methodologies developed in the late 1970’s and greatly improved by much debate and practical experience over the last decade or so (Boddington 1978; Harris 1979; DUA 1980; Pearson and Williams 1992). This entails the identification of individual stratigraphic units (or contexts), the comprehensive description and planning of each unit, and the preparation of a Harris matrix to chart the stratigraphic position of each context. Postexcavation studies are based on the hierarchical grouping of contexts allowing interpretive statements to be made, and form a basis for assemblage analysis of artefactual material, a technique that has been used with much success (DUA 1989; Clark 1988; 1992). Those experienced in these techniques will be well aware of their effectiveness and power in deeply stratified situations, and will also be well aware of their shortcomings, as reflected in many of the papers at this conference; such methodological debates are. I feel, a sign that this avenue of archaeological thought is healthy and prospering.

By contrast, rural excavations have no such body of established methodology to call upon, even if only to form a platform for debate. The methodologies adopted on urban sites, with their emphasis on sequence and individual stratigraphic units, are not appropriate on rural sites, where identification of natural processes can be of paramount importance in understanding and explaining the stratigraphic sequence.

Much of our work on rural prehistoric sites has taken place in conditions similar to those usually encountered in urban environments; the creation of the Eurotunnel terminal at Folkestone, for example, entailed a major programme of survey, excavation and other interventions in appalling weather, under severe time constraints, and often working alongside site plant. The simple translation of techniques developed in urban situations was clearly inappropriate; luckily we were able to draw on the skills of an experienced team of field supervisors, but staff training and debate was hampered by the lack of published methodologies appropriate for the types of archaeological phenomena they were examining in such difficult conditions.

The major focus of traditional recording systems has been on sequence; individual stratigraphic units are identified, recorded as independent entities and their relative stratigraphic positions recorded, usually portrayed in the form of a Harris matrix. The technical expression of these concepts, such as the ‘single-context planning’ technique, has proved most successful in excavation and study of complex deeply-stratified sites. However, the potential of these techniques to explore issues of deposit formation processes and post-depositional change has not been fully explored as yet. These observations are not particularly new; studies of residuality, microstratigraphy, artefact distribution, etc. have all been carried out.
using the underlying concept of the stratigraphic unit, though these techniques have yet to be woven into an articulated and published methodology.

The very idea of a 'stratigraphic unit' in practical terms is difficult to define; in common sense we all perceive layers of differing nature overlying each other, but when it comes to the crunch the identification of a single stratigraphic unit is a highly subjective and interpretive process. The concept falls between a processual definition (the archaeological manifestation of an 'individual action' in the past) and a descriptive definition (the black stuff overlying the yellow stuff). Harris's seminal work on stratigraphy (1989) falls into difficulties in attempting to identify this concept, particularly in the quest for 'laws of archaeological stratigraphy'. However, we should not be too quick to attack these concepts or the Harris matrix; whilst they may not be the complete answer, they are valuable heuristic models, which have proved their worth time and again, and will continue to be useful if their benefits and limitations are understood.

The attempt to understand processes that have acted upon the formation of a context, and the post-depositional changes that it may have undergone, now seems to be near the top of the agenda of modern practical stratigraphic study, and some useful material is beginning to appear in the literature. However, many recording systems rely on the concept of the individual stratigraphic unit as the foundation of their perception of stratigraphic sequence. It is this conceptual base that I suggest should be reviewed.

The use of the stratigraphic unit as the conceptual base for recording is not always adequate for certain phenomena that one may perceive during the course of excavation. Processes may act upon a sequence without destroying the physical attributes of the individual stratigraphic units; bioturbation may sort artefacts without necessarily blurring the interfaces between contexts; differences in underlying subsoil may affect the survival of stratigraphic sequences; the interfaces between stratigraphic units, often not independently recognised, may contain important information. A 'stratigraphic sequence' thus may be viewed as a palimpsest of processes and actions within contexts, between contexts and throughout a group of contexts. A recording system based on the identification of individual stratigraphic units has difficulty in incorporating all these factors in its record of the site. Increasingly at Canterbury we are considering moving away from the concept of the individual context as the basis of our recording and interpretation and more towards a search for a concept of process and action, attempting to identify and record relevant attributes to allow further analysis. At present these are simply subjects for debate; to what extent we can formalise a theoretical base, and translate that into a practical methodology useful within the constraints of 'rescue' archaeology, remains to be seen.

A review of the conceptual basis of our recording methodology has only just begun; can we adapt the present system based on individual stratigraphic units, or should we adopt a completely new recording structure? The absence of a practical methodology has hampered discussions of appropriate recording responses and the training of field staff; in practice field staff are expected to acquire knowledge and expertise through 'experience', a woolly and unexplained process. The non-vocational emphasis of many university courses and the perceived lack of consultation between university departments and professional units means that the issue of practical training for field archaeologists is of paramount importance. Given the gradual demise of the large scale excavations that seemed to be a characteristic of the early 1990's, where is an archaeological graduate to gain practical experience and develop expertise? This is an issue that the profession must take very seriously if we are to maintain standards and develop ideas in the future.

Given that an appropriate conceptual basis may be devised to understand the range of processes and actions we believe to be present in the archaeological record, it will be of great importance to turn this into a practical system that our field teams can use in their day-to-day work. We hope that the research currently being undertaken in university departments on depositional and post-depositional processes will also have a practical expression of use to field practitioners. An academic input would be most welcome here in identifying attributes that might signify particular processes or actions. One possibility is that a range of methodological recording 'tools' could be devised by specialists, with clear and unambiguous practical instructions for recording attributes in the field. In this way, specialist advice would be available to often hard-pressed field teams, enabling an increase of the inference potential of their records, the quality of archaeological interpretation and ultimately the job satisfaction of the team members.

Whilst published methodologies have proved highly successful in urban situations, and issues of depositional and post-depositional history may be adequately accommodated within this theoretical structure, the approach is not satisfactory in 'rural' situations where a wide range of depositional and post-depositional processes may act within, between and throughout stratigraphic units and sequences. There is thus no adequate practical, published methodology for excavating such sites in 'rescue' situations.

I feel that the profession should address these issues, perhaps adopting a different theoretical basis for stratigraphic recording based on the concept of
process and action, rather than the present emphasis on units of stratification articulated by sequence. In Canterbury we have embarked on a review of the epistemology of stratigraphic recording, with the hope that a practical approach to addressing the issues I have described may be devised.

Such a change in standardised recording responses, involving a more flexible response and a deeper understanding of archaeological process and post-excavation techniques, will necessarily entail a greater demand for skilled and experienced field excavators. The provisions for vocational training are at present almost non-existent, and this is a most pressing issue for the profession.

One step towards facilitating the publication of methodological debate would be a journal devoted to the subject; to this end a new journal is to be launched in 1993, entitled Advances in Archaeological Practice. At present the general editors are seeking copy for the first issue; more information and notes for contributors are available from CAT, 92a Broad Street, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 2LU.

References
Clark 1988 Guidelines for the Stratigraphic Analysis of Excavation Archives (Internal Publication, Scottish Urban Archaeological Trust)