Interpreting Stratigraphy 1993 (Edinburgh)

Introduction

by J. Barber

A number of themes emerged from the conference on stratification in Edinburgh on 25 November, 1992. The first of these was the evolution of procedures for the post-exca...
gies and, *mirabile dictu*, advances a set of procedures which can improve the precision of such dates in certain circumstances.

**Site evaluations**

With the steady growth of the developer market it sometimes seems that the only work undertaken by units is that of site evaluations. The problems of evaluation on deeply stratified sites are fully explored in Bruce Watson’s paper. His title questions, whether the results of evaluations, are a matter of luck or judgement and his paper suggests that the former is still at least as important as the latter. Our methodological poverty is nowhere more exposed than in the field of evaluations. Emery’s paper on the use of indices like the frequency of boundaries in a set of deposits is therefore especially welcome. Here again there are problems of terminology. Watson suggests that ‘assessment’ be restricted to desktop studies and ‘evaluation’ to the related field exercise. Emery is forced to define a number of terms to convey the sense of what he proposes and some of these terms will, I fear, prove misleading or ambiguous to a more general archaeological reader. More work for die study group, perhaps with a little assistance from the Plain English Society!

**Stratigraphic case studies**

Keith Matthews tackled the problem of deposits called ‘occupation deposits’ with skill and humour. He argues that many, if not all such deposits, post-date the occupations which are said to he their source. Carter’s paper describes the use of micromorphology to examine the nature of boundaries, particularly of abrupt boundaries. In his spoken lecture he had also dealt with the nature of micro-boundaries within deposits which, the latter having been defined in the field as single coherent deposits. Each of these presumably represents an hiatus in the accumulation of a deposit that is being formed by a single set of formation processes. It is possible, indeed probable, that the situation described by Matthews where cut features, like post-holes, originate somewhere within a coherent deposit, is to be accounted for in this way, ie the features originate at micro-boundaries that are effectively invisible to the field excavator. Micro-boundaries are only detectable by soil micromorphological studies and this intrusion of a post-exavcation process into what has hitherto been the domain of field archaeology is symptomatic of a two-way flow which is blurring the largely artificial division between these two activities.

John Hunter presented a paper at the conference in which he contrasted the ways in which the archaeological evidence is presented, depending on whether the result is to be promulgated in a learned journal or a lawcourt. His exposition of the archaeology of crime scenes was shocking, especially where the murder victim was a young boy. It seemed almost as if the comforting illusion we cherish that skeletons are just dry hones was swept aside for a moment and the real people emerged. The excavation of the remains of children and young people has always distressed me and I was surprised — quite unreasonably — to discover that many of my colleagues shared this sense of distress. John has not been able to prepare the paper for inclusion in these proceedings hut we look forward to hearing more from him in the future.

**The context of theory**

Clark and Hutcheson’s paper on, what is in effect, the attribute analysis of contexts marks a departure, or at least the beginnings of a departure from current thought and practice. In general, they suggest that by listing the relevant attributes of each context in a sequence these may then be ranked in order of the differences between them to produce a meaningful interpretation of the contexts and, by extension, of the site. All other contributors have assumed that we need to understand the processes of deposit formation, *ie* the processes by which the deposits came to contain their several and disparate elements (or attributes), before we can fully interpret the contexts and
thence the sites.

Their paper, like Emery’s is rich in neologisms, many of which are good and useful additions to our professional lexicon. However, where pre-existing terminology conveys the sense of what we wish to communicate, this must, surely take precedence. In particular, I favour the use of ‘boundary’ and avoidance of the use of ‘interface’. The former has a set of clearly defined characteristics, derived from its use in soil science, which convey essential information about the processes of formation of the deposits it delimits. This is again, a matter for a terminological study group.

**The official view**

Given the angst ridden response of the profession, south of the border, to MAP2, it was thought appropriate to include in the conference a paper from Historic Scotland on their requirements of the excavation database, prior to the commencement of post-exavcation analyses. This was provided by Patrick Ashmore and, if we may judge from the lively and largely complimentary debate from the floor, its open and reasonable approach was warmly welcomed by English colleagues. While Ashmore was careful to emphasise that he was not being critical of English Heritage’s approach, English colleagues clearly felt that the level of consultation and discussion which underpinned the Scottish ‘Structure Report’ contrasted strongly with the perceived lack of those features in the formulation of MAP2. The openness of Historic Scotland to debate and discussion, a hallmark of David Breeze’s incumbency of the Chief Inspector’s post, was clearly seen by all as a ‘good thing’. To be fair to English Heritage, however, the unbiased reader will find it hard to detect significant differences between the products called for in both these documents!

**Egg sucking for beginners**

The Edinburgh conference was the second in the current series but it would be wrong to forget some of the earlier conferences on stratification held in Scotland and in York, nearly a decade ago. The tendency to forget the first faltering steps in any subject is common but one to be avoided nonetheless. Kate Steane attributes the origins of land use diagrams to the work of Tim Williams and his colleagues on the East of Walbrook Project. However, they have been used, in one form, in European Prehistoric studies for many years, (see, for example, Renfrew 1979, Fig 2, 144) albeit that they were not called land use diagrams. The present burgeoning of interest in the study of stratification and in post—excavation analysis in general should not blind us to the fact that our elders have covered this ground before us. The few footprints we find ourselves following on this path merely serve to confirm that we are probably heading in the right direction.
Abstracts from this conference

Shepherd, L.

Interpreting Landscapes: analysis of excavations in and around the southern bailey of Norwich Castle

Shepherd summarises the problems of correlating archaeological information from several small excavations of deeply stratified urban sites. Groups, sub-groups and land-use diagrams had been used to interpret such data. The main focus of this paper is the adaptation of this system to a six acre site in Norwich, which presented different problems in terms of analysis and synthesis.

Steane, K.

Land Use Diagrams: a hierarchy of site interpretation

In this paper, Steane examines the potential of land use diagrams to facilitate site syntheses and inter-site comparisons, drawing on experience of analysing several sites in the Lincoln area.

Hammer, F., McCann, W and Elsdon, N.

Does the History match the Archaeology?

The Fleet Valley Project is a large and complex multi-period site in London consisting of 103 individual excavations. Archaeological interpretation was first undertaken without examination of relevant historical documents. The historical evidence was incorporated at a later stage, and this paper examines the interaction between the two different data sources of archaeology and history.

Lowe, C.

Data Washing, the Database and the Dalland Matrix

This paper provides an overview of project management procedures, and the background to use of AOC (Scotland) Ltd's database recording system and stratigraphic analysis program. The interrogation of the stratigraphic data through this medium is discussed, along with the implications of computer-based analysis for excavation and post-exavagation procedures.

Dalland, M.

Calibration and Stratigraphy

Dalland demonstrates how the combination of radiocarbon and stratigraphic data can be used both to improve the precision and interpretation of radiocarbon dates, and to improve the presentation of stratigraphic data by providing a chronological scale.

Alexander, D and Armit, I.

Unstratified Stratigraphy: methodologies for interpreting and presenting cropmark sites

Cropmark sites are, by nature, heavily truncated, and therefore stratigraphic links between features may be difficult or impossible to establish. This paper examines the methodology employed at one such site: the prehistoric site of Wellbrae in Clydesdale. The authors suggest that basic stratigraphic links can be used to form a skeleton site stratigraphy, which may be graphically presented and expanded with ceramic evidence. It is suggested that such an approach will allow more critical appraisal of site interpretations and phasing.
Watson, B

The Evaluation of Urban Stratigraphy: a question of luck or judgement?

The evaluation of urban stratigraphy is often very difficult because of the complexity of the individual sites’ histories and their contemporary use. This paper examines the methodology of evaluation as employed at an area of the Augustinian Priory in London.

Emery, P

Interface Density and Stratigraphic Primacy: quantitative analyses for urban evaluation

Emery argues that definition and recording of attributes during evaluation should be consistent and quantitative, to allow comparisons of the quality of stratification to be made across a town. He suggests that quantitative measures of ‘stratigraphic coherence’ and ‘stratigraphic complexity’ should be targeted in evaluation.

Matthews, K

A Futile Occupation? Archaeological meanings and occupation deposits

The term ‘occupation deposit’ is commonly used, referring to a deposit containing domestic material indicative of human habitation. However, the explicit meaning of the term, and the reasons for its application in different instances, is often passed over. This paper provides a critical appraisal of the (mis)application of ‘occupation deposit’, and discusses the different formation processes which may be implied, using as a case study a rural Saxon site at Letchworth, Hertfordshire.

Carter, S

Soil Thin Sections as an aid to Stratigraphic Interpretation

The interpretation of stratigraphic boundaries is clearly a significant part of archaeological analysis. Soil thin section analysis is used as part of the process, but Carter argues that more routine use of the technique would produce more substantial reward.

Clark, P and Hutcheson, A

New Approaches to the Recording of Archaeological Stratification

This paper summarises the development of approaches to archaeological stratigraphy. The authors argue that terms such as ‘context’ fail to provide an explicit understanding of stratigraphic identity, and suggest that ideas of process related to the entire stratigraphic sequence may be more appropriate.

Ashmore, P

Historic Scotland’s Requirements of the (Data) Structure Report

The ‘Structure Report’, as defined by Historic Scotland, is designed to be the immediate product of excavation: an intermediate summary to define the questions and funding of post-exavcation analysis. Ashmore discusses the implementation of this approach.