Interpreting Stratigraphy 1995 (Norwich)

Introduction

by Liz Shepherd

*a job of unearthing and piecing together
and sometimes a piece won’t fit
because it’s part of something else
and sometimes it is just a bit of old rubbish.*

Seeking ideas for this foreword, I rediscovered John Hegley’s poem ‘Digging for it’ from which the above lines seemed particularly apt. The extract sums up the process of archaeological enquiry and the frustrations of trying to find an interpretation that can be reconciled with all the evidence.

‘Interpreting Stratigraphy’ is a dynamic conference series, characterised by informal presentation and lively debate. By disseminating expertise and experience, it encourages the innovation, development and wider application of archaeological methods, both practical and analytical. The diversity of contributions reflects the increasing collaboration between stratigraphers and other specialists that an holistic approach to interpretation and publication demands.

The fifth conference, held at Norwich Castle Museum, was attended by over eighty people in spite of a rail strike. It covered three broad subjects: the study of redeposition and residuality, processes of building collapse and approaches to interpreting the remains of timber structures. A year on, I hope that the papers retain in published form their individual character and freshness as I have deliberately kept editing to a minimum. They appear in this volume in the order in which they were given.

Abstracts from this conference

Brown, D

_Contexts, Their Contents and Residuality_

Residual finds are those which occur in deposits later than the date of their origin and dispersal. Redeposited contexts are those which have been disturbed and laid down again subsequent to the date of their original deposition. Residual finds are often seen as an indicator of redeposition. This raises one question of the validity of finds for such a purpose, and another regarding the problems of identifying redeposited contexts where no finds are present. In addressing this, the placement of an archaeological context within a stratigraphic sequence is examined. This is followed by a consideration of the types of finds which are useful in the construction and interpretation of a sequence. Case studies are presented before a conclusion is made.

Vince, A

_Approaches to Residuality in Urban Archaeology_

This paper uses data from several urban sites in Lincoln to assess the impact of residuality on different finds types and stratigraphic sequences. Vince describes the implementation of ‘Plotdate’ software, which facilitates modelling and testing of different hypotheses on a site’s stratigraphic development and relationships.
Slowikowski, A

‘The Greatest Depository of Archaeological Material’: the role of pottery in ploughzone archaeology

Defining residuality and redeposition during the excavation of rural sites is a recurring problem. This paper considers the use of ceramic data in the interpretation of those processes, raising several questions in an attempt to define the problems in current accepted methodologies.

Reynolds, P

The Life and Death of a Post-Hole

The construction of the Pimperne Round House and subsequent dismantlement have already been reported (Harding, Blake and Reynolds 1993). This paper seeks to focus upon two significant discoveries raised during the dismantlement process: firstly, the projected longevity of such a structure, and secondly, the nature of material finds from principal post-holes.

Keevill, G

Processes of Collapse in Romano-British Buildings: a review of the evidence

Roman archaeology has always involved a strong element of buildings study. In many areas of the Empire this has included investigation of substantially intact structures. In the western Empire, however, archaeologists have of necessity kept their eyes closer to the ground. This has led to a great deal of research into building plans, but superstructural evidence has largely been neglected. The first part of this paper reviews the evidence for building superstructures in the form of collapsed walls, which have been excavated in Italy, Germany, Britain and elsewhere. The second part discusses the means by which structures collapse, and the ways this can be studied in the archaeological record.

Strickland, T

Some Observations on the Old Age, Dereliction and Ruination of Classical Buildings and Structures

Strickland’s paper compliments that presented by Graham Keevill at the same conference. It examines modern parallels of disuse, dereliction and abandonment, and highlights some common-sense considerations for interpretation. He examines questions of re-use, and emphasises the gradual and piecemeal nature of abandonment processes.

Goodburn, D

Beyond the Post-Hole: notes on stratigraphy and timber buildings from a London perspective

This paper presents some new information on the nature of timber buildings in English towns during the periods c.AD50-300 and c.AD890-1250. The principal sources for the evidence discussed are MoLAS excavations in waterlogged areas of London, from which evidence of the techniques of construction of early timber and timber-and-earth buildings emerged. Goodburn reminds us that post-hole plans are just that, not ‘buildings’, and emphasises the nature of buildings in three dimensions.

Martin, G

Aspects of Norwegian Waterfront Archaeology: the case study of Trondheim

This paper deals with some of the stratigraphic problems that have been encountered on a large-scale archaeological investigation into a medieval waterfront in Trondheim, Norway. The paper centres on recognising the excavated archaeological elements, assessing their influence on the physical townscape and detailing some of the problems in formulating relative and chronological phases.
Area excavations, salvage recording and watching briefs were undertaken by MoLAS during redevelopment of Fenning’s and Topping’s wharves in London. This work revealed the southern abutment of the 12th century stone-built London Bridge, plus fragments of earlier timber bridges, waterfronts and the buildings of the medieval and post-medieval bridgehead, truncation horizons, fluvial deposits and a Bronze Age ring ditch. A large number of dendrochronological samples were taken. This paper discusses the post-excavation methodology applied to integrate the records of some 15 different areas, including the integration of dendrochronology and cartographic research.