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Archaeology as a media experience

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This paper is written by an archaeologist who has been closely involved with broadcast media (both television and radio) over the last eight years. It is not a conventional academic paper but a reflection on the relationship between archaeology and broadcast media, examining in the process some of the ways in which the past is presented to a viewing and listening public. The role of broadcast media in education will also be examined.

Archaeology is the study of the human past through its material remains, the coins, stone tools, bones and fragments of pottery that once excavated, studied and reported, form the basis for the majority of museum displays. Archaeology is an academic subject, increasingly scientific and professional and with an awareness of the need for public sympathy, if not actual engagement.

In Britain, the celebrated archaeologist Sir Mortimer Wheeler realised, as long ago as the 1930's, that if archaeology was to survive and thrive then it needed to communicate with an audience far beyond the confines of the academic world. He used his flamboyance, the scale of the sites that he investigated, and his understanding of the media in its broadest sense to bring archaeology to the public. He also realised that the appeal of archaeology lay in its ability to generate 'stories'.

It was Wheeler that helped to develop the relationship between archaeology and the media as a panellist on the successful show, 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?' broadcast between 1952 and 1960 by the BBC, then the sole television channel. In this series, hosted by archaeologist Glyn Daniel, the panellists attempted to identify a range of objects drawn from British Museums. This was a novel format, an object based quiz show, and one that has not subsequently been attempted.
The success of 'Animal, Vegetable, Mineral?' resulted in

a series of archaeological documentaries under the title of 'Buried Treasure' that ran between 1954 and 1959. 'Treasure' was here taken in its broadest sense and programmes examined sites such as Scara Brae in Orkney, the stone rows of Carnac in Brittany and the Etruscan towns and tombs of Italy. In 1966 the BBC created an Archaeological and Historical Unit, under the direction of producer Paul Johnstone and between 1965 and 1989 this unit made over 250 programmes under the title 'Chronicle'. These were extraordinarily popular documentaries, with regular audiences of over 3 million, rising to over 5 million when the subject was Egypt. This was archaeology and television at its best due largely to Paul Johnstone who became eventually an archaeologist in his own right, making valuable contributions to experimental archaeology. Sir Mortimer Wheeler said of Johnstone 'Paul would have made a good professional archaeologist with his intense attention to detail and his visual appreciation of everything'.

Chronicle was taken off the air not due to any apparent dwindling of popularity, but possibly simply because it had been running for so many years. It was not replaced by any long running series that took archaeology as its subject matter, although significant new discoveries were still considered worthy subjects for documentary films. What is apparent in looking back over the early 1990's is that archaeology was still regarded as a subject for straightforward documentaries and that there was considered little scope for repackaging what was a essentially a scientific discipline into new formats. However, with the addition of more channels, both terrestrial and satellite, and increasing expectation for 'entertainment' from viewing audiences, it was inevitable that the relationship between archaeology and broadcast media would change. It is worth examining just what each one of the 'partners' in this relationship can offer the other.

There is undoubtedly a huge and apparently growing interest in all aspects of the human past. History and archaeology can both offer insights into much of this past, with archaeology offering the only means of understanding the more remote past, devoid of written records. Where archaeology may be seen as more appealing to the media than historical research is in its sense of immediate discovery. An excavation can provide

objects, sometimes 'treasure', as well as excitement, drama and a sense of mystery and genuine revelation. It can also provide 'characters' from a discipline that has traditionally, perhaps falsely, been seen as being populated by eccentrics.

But what does archaeology wants from the media? In broad terms archaeology wants exposure to a wider audience, beyond that provided by more traditional methods of 'outreach'. Museum exhibitions, 'popular' publications, lectures, and even the exposure offered by the internet, cannot deliver the instant exposure offered by television. Even the most obscure programmes, shown at some unfortunate time can generate nearly 1 million viewers. Compare this to the sales of books intended for a wider audience where 20,000 is considered highly successful, or the 250-500 print run of the average academic publication.

Given these mutual expectations it is now important to examine the range of programmes that have developed, largely during the last decade.

The best known is 'Time Team', a simple but successful format that is now in its 12th series. The format is simple, an archaeological challenge such as the investigation of a site or landscape but with a time limit; just three days to solve the mystery/find the answer. This three-day structure is designed to fit with that of an hour-long programme made for commercial television, punctuated by three commercial breaks. The 'team' is of carefully chosen 'characters', kept in order by presenter, and genuine archaeology enthusiast, Tony Robinson. The production team for Time Team shoots is huge, with multiple camera crews, a large production team, many 'cast' members and specialists including geophysical survey team. The scale of the operation is necessary in order to have enough filmed in three days to make a one hour programme.

'Time Team', part high-speed archaeological evaluation, part 'challenge' programme and part soap opera with a cast of loveable eccentrics, has undoubtedly raised the profile of archaeology in Britain. It showcases scientific techniques such as geophysical survey, ensuring that the idea of 'geophys' is firmly embedded in the public's consciousness. However, due to the self-imposed three-day time limit, it cannot demonstrate the potential for analysis and

greater understanding of excavated finds and other evidence. Essentially Time Team is archaeology packaged, scripted and acted out for television, complete with 'discoveries' that sometimes appear to be re-staged for the camera and conclusions that at times cannot be fully justified by the archaeological findings. It's impact has been and continues to be huge and in 2004 it still delivers consistently high audiences and much loyalty from its viewers.

In 1998 BBC2 first broadcast what was assumed by many to be a rival to Time Team. Devised and presented by the author of this paper, 'Meet the Ancestors' ran for seven series, ending in 2004, and had an equally simple format, based on the premise that the best way to understand the past is through its inhabitants, the 'ancestors' of the series title. The starting point for each programme was the excavation of a human burial, not organised by TV production but being carried out by professional archaeologists as part of research or pre-construction works. As the TV production depended upon being invited to film excavations then the relationship between the two parties was consequently very different. The other main contrast with the 'Time Team' approach was that with no time limit, 'Meet the Ancestors' dealt not just with the excavation and the immediate results, but with the subsequent scientific analysis of the entire range of material recovered. Facial reconstructions of the individuals who were the subjects of the programmes enabled 'Ancestors' to be 'met' and scientific analysis of a wide range of artefacts and environmental samples allowed for their lives to be reconstructed in some detail.

The first three series were produced by a very small crew using DV cameras, this arrangement guaranteeing the flexibility to be able to respond rapidly to unexpected discoveries. In later series programmes were lengthened from 30 minute to 50 and the concept of 'Ancestors' was widened beyond just human burials to include many wider aspects of the human past. 'Meet the Ancestors', certainly in its original 30 minute format, was archaeology as it happened, the programmes attempting to show the entire process from excavation, through analysis to conclusion.

It is a well known cliché that imitation is the sincerest form of

flattery and whereas 'Time Team', perhaps due to the strength and distinctiveness of the original format, has not had its imitators, Ancestors spawned a range of imitations. 'Secrets of the Dead' and 'Tales from the Grave' (both Channel 4) and 'Ancient Murder Mysteries' on Channel 5, were all based on the familiar concept of taking a human burial as the starting point for the programme narrative and in some cases involved 'Meet the Ancestors' trademark of facial reconstruction.

Beyond these two long running series, over the past four years both the BBC and Channel 4 have experimented with other archaeological formats.

'Two Men in a Trench' (BBC2) dealt with the subject of battlefield archaeology, ran for two series and was aimed firmly at a younger audience. Presented by two young male archaeologists, Tony Pollard and Neil Oliver, it was a mixture of investigation, including metal detecting and excavation, and reconstruction, sometimes light-hearted. The series is reported to have been commissioned on the basis that each battlefield site would produce mass graves. Such graves were inevitably and conspicuously absent.

'Time Flyers' (BBC 2) took as its subject aerial archaeology. Presented by a team consisting of Mark Horton, Jo Caruth and Dave MacLeod, its starting point was a view from the air, provided by the main 'prop', a helicopter. Initially somewhat like a shorter (half hour) version of 'Time Team' it developed into a series that took more of a landscape approach, examining less fashionable types of sites and periods such as post medieval highland clearance and the WW II decoys designed to lure enemy aircraft away from Hull docks. Two series were broadcast.

'Hidden Treasure' presented by Miranda Krestovnikoff (not an archaeologist), took as its theme the objects ('treasure') that are found on a regular basis by the users of metal detectors and the process of reporting, investigating and ultimately of rewarding the finders. What was being documented was effectively the work of the Portable Antiquities Scheme, designed to encourage the reporting and recording of archaeological finds. This series was made by the same team that produced 'Meet the Ancestors' but was heavily criticised by archaeologists for placing too much emphasis on the monetary, rather than the

historical, value of the objects discovered. Only one series was broadcast, in 2003, and, on the basis of the resulting antagonism, it must be questioned whether a second could have been made.

In the same way that the word 'mystery' is often a component of archaeological programme titles, the word 'extreme' is often used to promote films about weather, animals or sports. The final format to be described, broadcast on Channel 4 in 2004, introduced this concept to the world of archaeology.

'Extreme Archaeology' (or 'ExA' as it liked to be known) was made by the same production company that makes 'Time Team' and involved the examination of sites in locations too 'extreme' for the regular personnel. In this series, aimed again at a younger audience, a team of three young women, Katie Hurst, Meg Watters and Alice Roberts, under the leadership of Mark Davies, a male Welsh volcanologist and helped into place by an 'access team', caved, climbed, abseiled and waded through mud to reach their objectives. At this point a range of conventional archaeological techniques were brought to bear. The sense of drama and the 'extremity' of the locations were at times over emphasised and the series attracted much adverse comment from the wider archaeological community who felt that there was to much 'extreme and not enough 'archaeology'.

So what of the future? 'Extreme Archaeology' may have attempted to provide many of the key requirements of commissioning editors. Its format sought to package archaeology in a way that was upbeat, dramatic (even if some of the drama had to be constructed) and above all would appeal to a younger audience. This is a laudable aim, but can it be delivered without compromising the subject that is being portrayed?

What is clear is that major archaeological discoveries, the 'biggest' the 'oldest' the most 'macabre/bizarre/inexplicable', will continue to be regarded as suitable subjects for documentaries. But beyond these, what formats will be devised to repackage archaeology for a more demanding viewing public and how will archaeology respond to the growing demand for involvement that has been fuelled by this intense media interest?

This brings me on to the final part of this discourse. The question of what happens beyond the broadcast? Media exposure of archaeology has created a wider interest in the subject than ever before and broadcast media can have an educational role while providing entertaining programmes. Numbers of students enrolled in both full time and part time archaeology courses have grown considerably over the last decade and interest is catered for by a wide range of popular publications and on-line material. What is not provided, however, is what is ultimately desired by many of those who develop this interest, the opportunity to be involved in fieldwork, and more specifically, excavation.

Archaeology in Britain has grown enormously in recent decades and has, in the process, become more professional –there is more archaeology being done by more archaeologists. But just as public interest and desire to be involved has grown, this professionalism and the increasingly scientific nature of excavation and analysis have made involvement more difficult. In a world of archaeology that is increasingly driven by commercial pressures there is little opportunity for part time volunteer work. In consequence the tradition of locally based fieldwork is in decline in many areas, not helped by the increasingly aged membership profile of many local or regional archaeological societies.

Channel 4 attempted to address this problem with a bold experiment in 2003. Time Teams 'Big Dig', a live event broadcast over a week during the summer was intended to provide a vehicle for anyone to become an instant archaeologist. All over the country people could apply to dig a test pit. The proposed location was then checked to ensure that it did not encroach on an already known archaeological site and guidance on the excavation and recording was given. This project, although supported by English Heritage, did not meet with universal approval from professional archaeologists and the broadcasts proved that on the whole 1m by 1m test pits do not make enthralling television. It will be interesting to see if this experiment will ever be repeated and to see whether it has generated any more lasting means of involving the public in excavation.

As a media 'experience' archaeology is being asked to

change, and archaeologists may be asked to become things that they are not necessarily comfortable with; more dramatic, more extreme, more 'eccentric'. If these characteristics cannot be provided by the archaeologists themselves then the subject may be take away from them and the subject given to those who can, professional but non-specialist presenters, television 'personalities' or comedians. This is when archaeology on television will cease to become educational, except in a peripheral way, and will become entertainment.

The media have responsibilities, to allow whenever possible, the archaeologists themselves to explain their world and their understanding of the past. The media should also acknowledge that they have to a large degree created this upsurge of interest in archaeology and the practical side of investigating the past. The media therefore has a responsibility to help provide the means for this interest to be fulfilled, but will it and can it take on this responsibility in a world that is highly competitive and increasingly tightly budgeted?

The media and archaeology have, on the whole, had a good relationship in recent years. As the needs of both partners change, that of television for more entertaining and dramatic formats, that of archaeology to get the message across without resorting to hyperbole, the relationship will undoubtedly be tested, and may not survive intact.

As an archaeologist I would like to continue to see archaeology on television, but real archaeology, presented by real archaeologists, with real passion.