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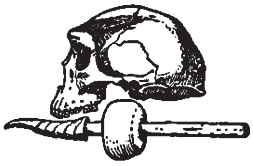

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Guest Editorial

Heat and dust: some reflections on contract archaeology in southern Africa

These days, more and more archaeologists work as full-time contractors, carrying out surveys, excavations and analyses for development projects, usually as part of a larger-scale environmental impact assessment. There is no doubt that contract archaeologists contribute significantly to knowledge of the archaeological record. But our relatively small contribution to archaeological publication is sometimes a matter for concern, as Tom Huffman has pointed out recently in a thought-provoking editorial to the *Bulletin*. Why, if contractors do so much fieldwork, do we appear to fail in our professional obligation to publish the results?

The easy answer to this question should be stated, if only for the record: academic archaeologists in this part of the world are paid – even if only in part – to carry out original research. Then, if they are based at a South African institution they may be rewarded again – indirectly – when their research appears in an approved, peer-reviewed journal. The economics of contract archaeology are different: the archaeologist carries out a survey or other task and produces a report that forms part of the legal compliance of the client, or project proponent, in terms of national legislation, company standards, or the guidelines of international finance corporations. The report is in a format dictated by the client and is, moreover, the property of the client.

Some might dismiss the notion of academic as opposed to contract archaeology, with the argument that these are differences not of kind, but of degree, and subject to shifts in any one career. Like many archaeologists, I too, have a foot in each camp. But there remains a real enough distinction in everyday working life, which in my view, is worth exploring further. By way of explanation, I prefer the term 'contract archaeology' rather than 'cultural resource management' because archaeologists are generally engaged on a defined contract basis, and this very rarely involves management in a form that would be recognisable to any project proponent of my acquaintance. Besides, the acronym 'CRM' only befogs an area of work that is otherwise simple enough for anyone to understand.

To produce publishable research results, and thereby hold up his or her head as an archaeologist, the contractor must first do the work, wait to be paid, and then, if motivated to develop the project further, find some way of funding it. There are many obstacles: it is difficult for contractors to remain abreast of the literature as internet access to subscription publications (sponsored at universities), is nearly unaffordable to individuals; conference attendance also becomes a rare extravagance, and radiocarbon dates an unattainable wish. Although it is often extremely interesting and has its own unique rewards, contract work usually takes place very far from the collegial banter of the departmental tearoom. Under conditions of relative isolation, uncertainty and considerable pressure of work, is it surprising, then, that contract archaeologists publish so little?

However, our work is almost inherently destructive; if our observations are not published, then we become part of the very process of attrition that we claim to arrest or mitigate. In this sense, the role of the archaeologist in the multi-disciplinary field of environmental impact assessment is unusual, for it carries a responsibility beyond the remit of contract, to the profession as a whole. Although the results of contract work often remain unpublished in the formal sense, they are nearly always written up, and more comprehensively than many research journals, with strict word-limits, can afford to allow. This is because it is on the basis of submitted reports that contract work is paid. So, contracting has its own literature – a vast grey literature, to be sure – that is subject to very critical evaluation by the client or an external reviewer. For example, the client's legal risk evaluator may be keen to ask whether a 50% archaeological sampling intensity involves an unacceptable risk of lost mining or construction time in the event of an unanticipated 'chance find'.

The reservoir of archaeological reports that accumulates outside the formal literature of the discipline represents a rich and quite invaluable resource for future research and publication. It is therefore extremely important to maintain secure archives of field notes, photographs, electronic survey files and final reports. Indeed, many contractors are reminded of this when a client calls to say, by the way, the report you gave us several years ago has been mislaid and could we please have another copy? And, as increasingly detailed survey data accrue in areas subject to intensive and repeated investigation, the contractor is sometimes struck by the relative superficiality of previous archaeological work in the same area. Comprehensive results based on contract work may take longer to appear in publication, but they can have an advantage in more thorough fieldwork.

Much as one might like to make frequent and publishable discoveries as a contractor, this is not how it works. Academic archaeologists choose the focus of their research, contractors do not. If something truly interesting emerges from a contract investigation, it is an unintended bonus. Still, it is a worrying fact that contractors are often required to use methods and criteria of assessment that reduce original and valuable field observations to ticked boxes in a matrix. This, in turn, may be swallowed by another, *über*-matrix representing an array of other investigations, and massaged gently to emerge at last as a result that is almost completely meaningless, archaeologically. Nearly every environmental consultancy has a favourite methodology of impact assessment, but I have not seen one

that satisfactorily reflects the particular qualities of the archaeological evidence.

Although, unfortunately, the client very rarely encourages it, contractors should attend closely to what is sometimes called the knowledge, or research, 'dividend' of every contract operation. Some may dismiss this concept but certain progressive countries actually require a research motivation for contract work, something that could help to make contract archaeology a more rigorous field in southern Africa. In this view, compliance is not enough: meaningful contract work should take place in an informed, reflexive, context, for if we neglect to see its potential contribution to archaeological knowledge, then we reduce ourselves to little more than reasonably well-paid ditch-diggers. The question is, though, are young archaeology graduates entering contract work well enough trained in their field to make a contribution to its intellectual life? If they are not, then the relative isolation of contract work is not going to improve matters and they may well leave the discipline altogether.

Martin Carver elaborated on the gulf between contract and academic archaeology in a recent *Antiquity* editorial, pointing out that in the United Kingdom archaeological field skills are far more developed among contractors. Here, the situation is different and it is unlikely that southern Africa has any academic archaeologists who have never seen a trowel raised in anger. Nonetheless, vocational skills that a client might expect to see in an archaeologist have to be taught, not just picked up here and there. Apart from a good knowledge of archaeological principles, methods and material, which the client takes more or less for granted, he generally expects – but seldom gets – someone competent in GIS, survey design, report preparation, and project work, to name only four quite basic requirements in the contracting environment. Tasks such as drafting a contract bid, a scoping report or a project plan can be quite beyond the grasp of a new graduate, but this need not be so.

Some universities, such as Flinders in Australia directly address the needs of the contracting field, producing graduates trained for the purpose. If contracting continues to grow into a major component of southern African archaeology, then graduates must join the workforce as employable professionals. An appropriate model is provided by our sister discipline, geology, which combines a rigorous training in principles and practice, producing immediately useful professionals in the earth sciences. Bearing in mind that of all the geologists trained, only a tiny fraction produce research published in the peer-reviewed literature, the discipline has to judge itself on a broader basis than its output of research papers. Archaeology in southern Africa might do the same. But still, archaeological contractors could make a larger academic contribution, perhaps assisted through some sort of mentoring or research associate relationship with university departments. These, in turn, could actively involve experienced contractors in selected areas of student training. There will always be some sort of dichotomy but it need not be a vocational chasm.

In this discussion, it is important to consider why archaeologists end up contracting in the first place. There have always been fewer academic positions than qualified archaeologists, and turnover in university departments is always very slow. Research funding outside universities is extremely scarce in southern Africa, and contracting offers real possibilities to work in archaeology, following the adoption of enabling legislation throughout the region. But there is also a wider sea-change behind this, driven by new global practices and guidelines. In Namibia, I was able to work as an independent contractor fully 10 years in advance of the present heritage legislation. In the ten years since then, and after completing nearly two hundred medium- to large-scale archaeological contracts, I am struck by the fact that in only three cases were the project proponents actually directed by the national heritage authority to have the work done. Goodwill, and of course a measure of self-interest, drives most of the contracting I have been involved with, and it makes for a generally positive and rewarding work environment. I recommend it.

Contracting can be mind-numbingly dull and repetitive, especially when it consists of piecemeal work, without much prospect of sustained involvement. Like most archaeologists, contractors and otherwise, I have a region and period that particularly interests me: the Namib Desert, where I have worked now for over 30 years on the mid-Holocene to recent sequence. So, as an experimental antidote to short-termism in contracting, I combined a large number of contract and research projects, both completed and current, under the umbrella of a new regional research project which I called the Namib Desert Archaeological Survey. The only two points I need to make here are these: without exception so far, project clients are happy to be part of a larger effort to improve the archaeological knowledge-base for the region and, that a modest research effort can be self-funded through contract work. Within only a few years the project broadened to include several international post-graduate students and gathered momentum with an array of collaborative projects. It may not be sustainable, but the archaeology of the desert also speaks about life in a more general way, if one cares to listen.

Traditionally, university-based archaeology produces the most technically and theoretically innovative research, the ground-breaking work that leads the discipline. If contract archaeology continues to grow as it does now, we are faced with the prospect of an opposing trend: that of a discipline drowning, as if beneath shifting sand, in extremely large volumes of unpublished data, where the truly interesting is overwhelmed by the trivia of heritage compliance. Research oriented contracting is one way to navigate this landscape, but the great challenge is to fully develop that research and make a larger contribution to archaeology as a whole, through publication of research results as regional studies, as collections of related papers, and other formats suited to the sort of archaeology that contracting tends to produce. Indeed, it might be worth reconsidering the way in which archaeological material is presented in contract reports, by giving more prominence to research value. Heritage authorities in South Africa and elsewhere in the region could play a useful role in developing new standards that promote the knowledge value of contract archaeology, with less emphasis on the bureaucracy of heritage management.

I'd like to end where Tom Huffman began: at the Gates of Paradise, where Peter, we are told, will decide our fate. Only, it might not be the h-index of Google Scholar he would choose as his yardstick, for there are other measures that can be devised. One I would propose is an h-for-Helen-index, named after the (ex-barmaid) patron saint of archaeologists (roughly 270 AD). This easily administered procedure would consider the state of one's fingernails and other basic indicators of honest labour, including solar keratosis and chronic back trouble. Palaeontologists are automatically admitted, of course, but archaeologists with clean, manicured hands risk being sent to a sort of purgatory, to obtain redemption by labouring for some time under conditions of heat and thirst, tormented by flies.

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