

# Antiquity

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## Editorial Notes

AT this time of year we always welcome an influx of new readers, many of whom no doubt will scan the contents of this number with special attention. Although we should naturally like this, our 25th volume, to excel, the present number has been composed in the same way as its predecessors, and may therefore be taken as typical, except that, quite fortuitously, it has fewer illustrations than usual. There may be quite a few readers whose chief or sole contact with the world of archaeology is through the medium of these pages. In turning them over they may be interested not only in what the writers of the articles say but in why they should say it at all. In other words they will want to know what sort of things archaeologists do, and what they think most important. Everyone knows that they excavate, but two of the Notes (on spear-throwers and Bidassoa 'ploughs') show that mere observation and record is also an important part of archaeology. It is quite easy to acquire this habit of seeing the past in the present—one which adds a new interest to travel and enables the interested layman to make his contribution.



Excavation is, of course, the prime business of archaeology—or perhaps one should say that it is not excavation simply but the prompt and adequate publication of his excavation. (We know that someone may retort that the writer's own first major excavation report has only appeared this year, 36 years afterwards! But for this there were special reasons entirely beyond his control). But there is also a vast amount to be done by mere field-work without excavation at all. This sort of field-work is hardly practised at all outside Britain and a few countries of Northwestern Europe. For instance there is a whole group of defensive linear earthworks, in the region where Hungary, Yugoslavia and Roumania meet, still awaiting field survey and description; see the writer's note in the *Geographical Journal* for last December (pp. 218–20). The model for all such work is Sir Cyril Fox's survey of Offa's Dyke and Watt's Dyke, published serially in *Archaeologia Cambrensis*. Admittedly that survey was facilitated by the existence of large scale Ordnance Maps, such as are not available in Central Europe; but their place could have been taken by air-photographs. During the inter-war decades no attempt was made to secure such by the moribund archaeologists of that region. Even a detailed verbal description of the course followed by the dykes, with rough diagrams, would have been better than nothing. That could have been composed only by walking along the dykes and in no other way. It would have had far more value than much that passes for excavation.

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One of the minor impediments to doing such field-work, both on the ground and from the air, is a quite excusable ignorance of the need. Those laymen who have the opportunity are apt to assume that such things have been done, that dykes have been walked and fully described, and that earthworks so large and well preserved must surely be well known. That assumption was actually made, in the instance mentioned above, by one who had such an opportunity. It was a perfectly natural assumption; but it may be said that it is safer always to assume the opposite. If there is any doubt, a letter to some archaeologist will generally elicit the needful information. So too those whose business it is to fly often see crop-marks and other things that are in fact unknown and which, if recorded, would very often rank as valuable discoveries; but how are they to know what is new and unrecorded and what is already well known? There is room for published guidance in such matters, indicating promising regions and the things to look for.



Defensive linear earthworks were chosen merely as an example. There are, of course, many other remains susceptible to field-work alone without excavation. Megalithic monuments are such. Much of the earlier study of long barrows and cairns, long and round, was vitiated because the archaeologists did not make adequate plans. They planned the burial-chamber (which they called a 'dolmen') but omitted the rest of the monument of which it was an integral part. One might just as profitably make a plan of a porch and omit the house. Even when the plan was complete it was often sadly inaccurate, and on far too small a scale, as the writer and Mr Hemp found when they began to survey some of the burial-caves of Mallorca and Provence. There is still no satisfactory plan of some of the classic monuments of those lands, and of many others such as Sardinia which abounds in megaliths. Without such plans all typological study is hamstrung; it cannot function without them; it is based on field-work and without field-work it is mere waste of time. In the past fantastic typological structures have been built by arm-chair students upon defective field-observation, only to be kicked over by the dirty boots of some ruthless field-archaeologist or excavator.



If the plans of the monuments are inaccurate or incomplete any conclusions based on them must necessarily be similarly defective. It is questionable, as a reviewer points out elsewhere in this number, whether the typological study of the ground-plans of burial-chambers can do much to solve problems of settlement and origin; and it is quite certain that it cannot do so unless the basic facts are correct.



The construction of castles in the air is not peculiar to archaeology. The same kind of thing took place in cartography. An accurate map can only be constructed by making measurements in the field, starting with a carefully measured base-line. The process of making a map of the world began well, though on rather too ambitious a scale, and culminated in Ptolemy's work. But during the Dark Ages his principles were forgotten, and though Ptolemy's work was used, every kind of distortion was introduced by a failure to work scientifically. Idrisi's 12th century maps are little better than caricatures of cartography. Not only did they differ from those of others, but they differ in each version of his own work. They are strictly comparable with the different philosophic systems which have emanated from comfortable professorial chairs ever

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since Plato. The nature of the universe cannot be discovered by introspection, nor is it possible by introspection to construct a map of the world or a chronological chart or a typological sequence that corresponds with reality. These tasks can only be performed by measurements and observations made in their respective fields by astronomers and physicists, surveyors and archaeologists—in other words by field-work.



It thus becomes plain why field-archaeology is of such fundamental importance. It is merely the archaeological equivalent of a procedure common to all other branches of science. To attempt archaeological work without doing field-work is exactly the same as to try and make a map of a country without going there, or even questioning those who have done so. Compare, for instance, the Hereford map of the World with that of Fra Mauro. Neither is satisfactory by modern standards, but Fra Mauro's, based upon the best information available in 1459—i.e. upon the field-work of travellers—is far nearer the truth than the other, based upon mere speculation.



All this argument may perhaps be met with the retort that it is unnecessary nowadays, that the case has already been decided, and that a dead horse needs no flogging. But if the horse is practically dead in this country, it is still alive and kicking in others. A constant stream of articles and books still comes from the archaeologically backward lands, full of pictures of potsherds and flints and devoid of plans and sections, or, if such are present, mere caricatures drawn from memory in an office or study. Such may be due to bad field-work or none at all. The impression still exists, and finds expression in print, that it is enough to live in a museum to be an archaeologist. Museums are of course of vital importance, and ANTIQUITY has often pleaded their cause; but they are not enough. They must be supplemented by field-work if they are not to degenerate into charnel-houses containing the desiccated corpses of potential archaeologists. The best museum curators of course realize this to the full, and would welcome opportunities for field-work. They are often still hampered by an obsolete and pernicious tradition which regards museums as bank-vaults rather than dynamos of research; and all of them are overworked. These remarks are directed not to them but against the system of ideas of which they are the victims. So long as that system prevails, and so long as museums are understaffed, archaeology must suffer from deficiency. When all this has been said it still remains true that there are some countries where museums abound and field-archaeology is non-existent. And by field-archaeology here is meant not excavation (which is of course a most important branch thereof), but all that exploration in the open air of the kind described above.