

Antiquity

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Editorial Notes

THE exposure of the Piltdown fraud has been welcomed by two very different groups of people. Human palaeontologists are glad to be rid of objects that were inconsistent with each other and with a large range of securely established facts; and those who, from envy, hatred, malice, uncharitableness, or just plain ignorance, rejoice to see 'experts' discomfited, have presumably derived much consolation. The discomfiture must be admitted, but who were the 'experts'? The last thing we would wish would be to increase the discomfiture of those, if any, who are still amongst us; but it is only just to point out that none of them were archaeologists. The only one of those concerned with the original discoveries who could possibly be so called was Dawson himself, and his claims were very thin.



The bones and teeth were supposed to have been found in a shallow deposit of gravel and to be contemporary with or older than it; they were therefore the concern of those anatomists who specialize in human palaeontology, and the gravel was the concern of geologists. Archaeology so far did not come into the picture at all, and it was quite proper that the first account should have been given at a meeting of the Geological Society. (The present writer was present at it and remembers it well). Archaeologists deal with the works of man, not with his body, and as excavators it is their business to learn how to distinguish disturbed from undisturbed soil. The question of whether the Piltdown gravel had been disturbed seems never to have been asked; even if it had, it would have been difficult to answer because at that time in England the technique of excavation was still, in spite of General Pitt-River's work, very crude. Nevertheless, though the question was not asked, it should have been; soil-study was involved, and to that extent there was an archaeological aspect of the alleged discoveries.



But the Piltdown forger was careful to avoid as far as possible burying objects at the site. All the larger objects were picked up on the tip-heaps. Only one piece of skull was found *in situ*, and it was no larger than a thumb-nail and could easily have been pushed into the vertical face of the excavation. The slab of elephant-bone was tucked into the soil under the hedge, where it was said to have been 'presumably thrown by the workmen' (or words to that effect). A minute sliver of identical bone was found in the basal seam of clay, 'indicating the original horizon of the worked slab' (or words to that effect). The famous jawbone itself was in a small hump of basal gravel which the workmen had missed by reason of the floor of the pit being flooded. These facts suggest that the forger was astute enough to realize that any considerable disturbance of the soil might be detected, and to avoid it for that reason.

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This matter of soil-disturbance is of outstanding importance, as every excavator knows. It may occur in any site, whether stratified or not; in barrows and other earth-works burrowing animals, particularly rabbits, are prime sources of trouble, and so are the ancient occupants of a site who frequently dug pits and post-holes. But—and this is the important point—the qualified excavator is fully aware of these hazards; he is on the watch for them unceasingly all the time he is at work, and he can detect them when they occur. Usually it is not fraud that he is anxious about, but the danger of attributing to an older deposit objects which are in fact intrusive from a younger (upper) layer. Where fraud is concerned there are now ways of estimating the age of bones by treatment of the things themselves, but it is seldom possible to do this with archaeological objects. When these are in any way unusual, they can often only be dated by their associations. It is an archaeologist's business to do that, and it can only be done on the spot, not afterwards in a museum or elsewhere.



It is therefore hardly correct to say, as did a recent reviewer (*Times Literary Supplement*, 11 November, 1955, p. 675) that 'the diggings of archaeologists and the conclusions thus formed about the course of evolution have been peculiarly vulnerable to an expert who for any reason wishes to plant a find'. It is precisely in the 'diggings' that fraudulent insertion can most easily be detected, as at Glozel, by the normal methods. That has always been so, and on all properly conducted excavations it has always been a rule that all important finds are to be left undisturbed in the soil until they have been seen and recorded by the supervisor, who then removes them himself. Naturally he looks for signs of disturbance, which he seldom fails to detect. The passage just quoted also seems to imply that, on other sites besides Piltdown, erroneous conclusions have been drawn from objects which have been planted, as alleged, by 'experts'. One would like to be told where they are? In any case, the 'course of evolution' has been quite firmly established in broad outline by many discoveries made both before and after the Piltdown affair, by which they are in no way invalidated.



The review from which we have quoted was of a book called *Counterfeit* (John Murray, 15s.), written by Mrs Sonia Cole, and we agree with the opinion that it is 'a pretty good one'. But we are surprised that the reviewer was at first surprised to find an archaeologist writing 'about cheats'. He discovered why later; it was because our 'diggings' are so vulnerable thereto! If he were more familiar with archaeology he would know that, quite apart from 'cheats', archaeology *is* detection, and inference. Its methods are those of Sherlock Holmes applied to man's past. So it is merely an extension of the normal archaeological practice when the things to be detected are not past but present (fraudulent) activities; and if anyone outside Scotland Yard is by training fitted to write a book about 'cheats' it is an archaeologist. It only shows how little archaeology is really understood, in spite of its popularity. Where documents are involved it is a historian's job, or more strictly an archivist's. In both subjects a knowledge of the relative values of evidence is required, and that is why, when properly taught, they are so useful in the modern world. Those who have benefited by such training are for that reason better able to evaluate the contents of newspapers and their advertisements or, as members of a jury, the evidence of witnesses.

EDITORIAL NOTES

The reviewing of books is one of the functions of ANTIQUITY. In common with other journals we cannot usually review periodicals, though we may do so occasionally. In practice the choice is limited to those we receive. We sometimes write and ask for review copies of what seem to be important publications, and generally receive them in response. But there are some which we cannot get, chiefly those published or subsidized by foreign governments; that is unfortunate for several reasons. It is alleged that these, being subsidized, do not need the publicity of reviews—in other words, it does not matter whether they are sold or remain stacked in heaps in the office of the publisher. The taxpayers, at whose expense they are printed, might think otherwise, and in this country the Stationery Office, the Government publisher, pursues a much more enlightened policy. The result is that many archaeological books of basic importance, such as the final and definitive reports of large-scale government-sponsored excavations, escape that informed criticism which is the life-blood of all scientific work, and which as everyone knows they often badly need. Some of course are very good; others on the other hand are produced in a wasteful and extravagant format, with huge margins, masses of over-reduced half-tone illustrations, which, even when made from good photographs (which is exceptional), are often uninformative or merely inadequate substitutes for more plans, sections and drawings which require so much more work to produce. A plan or drawing which should be drawn for reduction has to be reproduced full size as a tiresome folder because the draughtsman did not allow for this. The whole confused mass is just thrown at the reader, who has to sort it out as best he can. Too often also the excavations described are themselves badly in need of criticism. In countries where professional archaeology is paramount (as it is in most southern countries) mordant criticism is stilled, for those inside are too closely involved to make it. The result is stagnation and the acceptance of standards of work and publication which are out-of-date elsewhere. In scientific work the rule of non-interference in the domestic affairs of other countries does not apply; we all suffer because our interests are essentially international.



With this number of ANTIQUITY we welcome a large accession of new readers, many of them in the United States of America. We hope that their first impressions will be favourable, and we feel quite confident because we know that this is a good number, with something of interest for everyone. We have some good stuff for the June number; an article on the Earliest Firemakers, by Dr Oakley; others on Early Greek Roads, Upland Houses, and the Archaeology of the Philippines. In another article we shall publish evidence to prove that coal was burnt in the Old Stone Age, some 40,000 years ago. We welcome suggestions (the note on Swanscombe in this number is the result of one such); and we also welcome criticisms, and try to act upon them.



Many of our new American readers came to us through an advertisement exchanged with the *Scientific American*, a monthly publication covering a wider range than our own. We wish to take this opportunity of recommending our readers to get the *Scientific American*, whose advertisement appears at the end. We have ourselves enjoyed reading it for many years; it contains popular but authoritative articles on the latest developments in physics, biology, astronomy and archaeology, and does for science as a whole what we try to do for archaeology.