

Antiquity

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Editorial Notes

EXCAVATION is, of course, the chief means by which the archaeologist performs his task of reconstructing the past, and it is likely to remain such. The different branches of archaeological technique are mostly concerned either with excavation itself and its products, or with chance discoveries made by digging for some other purpose. Let no one think that anything said here is intended to depreciate the value of excavation ; to do so would be unscientific and therefore absurd. But excavation is merely the first step in a long and arduous undertaking. No excavation is complete until it has been followed up by the conservation and exhibition of the discoveries, and by adequate publication of the results.



Conservation may take the form of 'filling in', as on most British prehistoric sites, where the policy of keeping them open is often impracticable on grounds of expense ; or by judicious restoration, such as that of H.M. Office of Works, or, abroad, by Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos. It may also take the form of treatment of objects *in situ* before removal ; the best examples in recent years being the measures adopted by Sir Leonard Woolley at Ur and by the Harvard-Boston Expedition at Giza (see *ANTIQUITY*, 1927, I, 216-8). Here great progress has been made, not so much in science itself as in its application by archaeologists. Fifty years ago we should have had nothing from these two sites but the imperishable remains, many of which would have been meaningless when thus divorced from their perishable framework.

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With the definitive publication of his results, the excavator's task may be said to end, for he is not, as such, concerned with the exhibition of his finds in museums. Publication necessarily involves the collaboration of specialists, and the stratigraphical position and associations of the important finds must be clearly stated. But no one expects the excavator to publish the final and complete account of everything. For instance, it is not his business to publish the transcription of every inscribed tablet or fragment of papyrus found, nor need he even be able to decipher them himself—many of the most distinguished and capable excavators today cannot do so. It is enough that he should supply the expert with certain essential information about their discovery.



The excavator is the front-fighter of archaeology ; he fights in the front-line trenches of the army which is advancing knowledge (not to be confused with that other army which claims to be advancing civilization !). In return he has a right to demand the support of those who can follow up his achievements and utilize them to the best advantage. Does he receive that support ? So far as certain already overworked specialists are concerned, he receives it in full measure ; but the patrons of learning, particularly the Universities, do not support him as they should. Specialism is a whole-time job, and there are not enough specialists. A young student's choice is generally limited by the necessity of earning a living ; if there are no endowments to help him during his ' post graduate ' period and few professorships to look forward to later on, he must perforce abandon the subject of his choice and yet another student is lost, too often to become a square peg in a round hole.



How is it, for instance, that papyrology, the study of ancient papyrus texts, seems to be becoming a lost art in this country ? It is not for lack of material, because there are masses of it buried in store-rooms at a certain University. How many students has that University endowed to transcribe and edit these papyri, recovered by one of its own professors ? (The answer is—ONE !) What proportion of the cuneiform tablets found during the last fifteen years or so has been published in Britain by endowed British students ? Is there any other country which has accumulated such masses of magnificent historical material, only to leave it unused ? What is wrong with the ' home front ' that it permits

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such a state of affairs, remaining apparently unconscious of any responsibility in the matter? Shortage of funds is no excuse, for money is forthcoming for other things for which no responsibility has been incurred.

For, apart from special cases (such as the papyri) where the responsibility is as clear as the daylight, there exists also a general moral responsibility to support the worker in the field. Unless he is supported in the obvious way, by enabling students to study and edit his specialist material, it would be better not to go on excavating, or to confine excavation to such sites as are endangered by 'the march of progress'. To carry out costly excavations in the East and then leave the important documents unread and unpublished is a futile proceeding; but it has been done, and the guilt remains.

Not only are the documents left undeciphered; there is no room, it seems, even to exhibit them or a mass of other objects found. It is notorious that the British Museum is overcrowded; so too is the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, which one might almost call the original home of Anthropology itself, so closely is it associated with the names of Tylor and Pitt Rivers. So too is the Ashmolean, the oldest museum in England, and one of the finest. There is no University in the world, we venture to say, with such a heritage; there are few that would not have put it to better use.

The proper remedy for this state of affairs is, of course, not to stop accumulating material but rather to subsidize the study and conservation of it. Till then, however, one naturally turns to consider other forms of archaeological work. Foremost among them is archaeological survey—the accurate location, planning, description and illustration of ancient monuments. We in England are justly proud of the pioneer work of our Royal Commission on Ancient Monuments and of the Ordnance Survey; and we think it is time to apply their methods to other countries. The proposed Archaeological Survey of Palestine is a step in the right direction, and deserves every support (including donations); it is to be carried out jointly by the Palestine Exploration Fund and the British School of Archaeology in Jerusalem, and has the promise of Government help. The results will appear in illustrated reports issued at regular intervals.

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The idea of such an Archaeological Survey deserves to be widely circulated, because it has a great future and is applicable also to other regions. What would not one give for Reports describing, on Royal Commission lines, the antiquities of Mesopotamia! Something of the kind, good enough in those days but now in some respects out of date, was attempted single-handed by Captain Felix Jones and H. B. Lynch in the middle of the nineteenth century. The mere description, illustrated by plans and air-photographs, of the visible remains of the country would be of the greatest use to intending excavators, and will besides record facts that would otherwise be lost to knowledge. We commend the suggestion to the young and active British School of Archaeology in Iraq (Gertrude Bell Memorial). It is, we feel sure, the sort of undertaking that Gertrude Bell herself would have approved, for much of her own work was of precisely this character.



If conservation of antiquities is the prime consideration, as of course it must be, the question arises—Where are those antiquities safest, in the ground or in an urban museum that may be bombed? The problem is a terrible one, but it must be faced. The one course which is 100 per cent. safe is complete publication, for this ensures that *some* historical records will survive, even if the originals perish. (But we are *not* publishing!). Thus in the same way, it is sometimes necessary, in the interests of science, to destroy the upper layer of a site in order to explore the lower layers; but before this is done the most complete record is made of the upper layer, which for the future will exist only on paper. Sir Flinders Petrie has stated the case with admirable lucidity (*Methods and Aims in Archaeology*, 1904, 173-4). The Ordnance Survey is attempting to do the same sort of thing for old estate-maps and cadastral plans in private hands. These usually exist only in the form of a single, irreplaceable manuscript, at the mercy of fire, damp and other accidents, including sometimes the negligence of ignorance. The broadcasting of facsimiles is the only reasonably sure safeguard against complete loss. Even a single edition may achieve this, as did Archbishop Parker's edition of Asser's Life of Alfred, published in 1574. (The original manuscript was destroyed by fire in 1731). Unfortunately antiquities are not always safe even when buried in the ground, especially in the East; but at any rate they are not then concentrated in vulnerable spots.