

## Australian Archaeology



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## ARCHAEOLOGISTS AND ABORIGINES

At a time when relations between archaeologists and Aborigines are under discussion, I thought it might be useful to offer a few thoughts drawn from my experience both here and in the Middle East.

It may come as a novel idea, to you as to me, that we have never asked the Aboriginal people if we could dig up their past. Certainly we regard this research as pertinent to the whole human race, but I am sure I would regard it as a discourtesy if someone were to research my life and fail to consult me. Each archaeologist may have his own way of telling Aborigines what he is doing and of seeking approval, but I think it is time we did it symbolically for the whole science - symbols being an important part of Aboriginal communication. For example, delegates on behalf of Australian archaeologists might meet with the NAC - socially, formally and with plenty of P.R. - explaining why this study is so important to us, what has been learnt so far and what we still hope to learn and then actually asking permission (with apologies for neglect in the past). If tactfully done, there need be no apprehension of refusal. Much the same could be done regionally for Aborigines generally feel a greater sense of belonging to specific areas, rather than to the continent as a whole.

The need for feedback was impressed on us at the last ANZAAS conference. This can be done by lectures and popular writing (e.g. in *Aboriginal News*, *New Dawn*, *Identity* or the local newsletters). Some academics have tried this and all would agree on the interest aroused. It is noticeable how press reports on spectacular finds are quickly taken up by Aborigines and used in their propaganda. Again social occasions are useful for this, especially barbecues and bush outings, when everyone settles around the fire to tell stories. The academic will find his work takes on a new character when he can simply share experiences with his dark friends.

It is no derogation of a scientific attitude to profess unashamedly a spiritual and emotional bond with our work. I like to point out that white Australians, well-off in other ways, are spiritually deprived because rootless, that the Aboriginal story is the heritage of all Australians and that through them we have vicarious roots in the Australian soil. Noting that even urban Aborigines have a feeling that the spirits of the Old People reside in the earth, I sometimes explain that these ancestors communicate with us by what they left in the ground and archaeological methods gives us a way of hearing what they say. While working in the Blue Mountains, I recalled to my friends the fancies of a mountain childhood that, since the mountain people had died out or scattered, I felt I owed it to the spirits of the dead to find out all I could and pass it on. Such thinking and speaking is quite compatible with a scientific mentality, for surely it is a mark of a truly educated person that he can pass with ease between different thought-worlds.

On the other hand it is fatal to be forced or corny - listening awhile will give the cue as to what to say, with sincerity.

Aborigines, as a matter of policy, could well be employed on excavations. They show considerable interest and also qualities which can be highly useful, e.g. sharp eyes, sensitive handling, careful movement, sense of history. From the beginnings of Middle East archaeology, the British trained local Arabs in certain aspects of excavation, e.g. trowelling, and in time there resulted a pool of workers so skilled that no campaign could afford to do without them. Often I have seen a European trench supervisor call in one of the technical assistants to find a level he had lost. Some of the technical assistants were promoted by British archaeological bodies to university study of archaeology and conservation, and these men in time came to be the all-important Directors of Antiquities in newly independent states - to the great advantage of British excavators. The British, generally, were sensitive to the impact of a dig on the local economy and were tactful in local and regional politics. Since the Six Day War, for instance, they have avoided all but salvage operations in Israel. This kind of policy paid off in remarkable relations with the Arabs at both local and government levels. Such examples can teach us a lot for the Australian scene.

On the subject of desecration, the observation can be made that, for practical purposes (i.e. apart from internal theological considerations), things are not sacred *in themselves* but only *in respect to certain people*. They can be sacred in varying degrees and at varying levels. Sacred things are not necessarily untouchable - what is expected is that they be dealt with respectfully, reverentially, and only by those who have a right to deal with them. The scientist himself shows a spirit akin to religious awe, a submission to facts which is very much like what the ancients termed "piety", but he shows that respect by an objective attitude to his data. But this treating a thing as an "object" can be objectionable to a person who regards it with religious reverence, or even with some kind of emotional commitment (e.g. sex as an object of scientific study). In a pluralist society it is no argument to say that such an attitude is irrational, unfounded or obstructive to scientific investigation, because attitudes at conflict are by definition subjective (on both sides), their validity above question and their respective value not comparable. Where conflict between attitudes appears, the solution need not be the cancelling of the one or the other, but rather the engineering of a situation where both lots of respect can be held simultaneously. In other words, the scientist with due permission may be able to handle his material with outward marks of respect which will satisfy the believer.

This applies to the question of burials and human bones. Just as the doctor is permitted to handle the living body, so the anatomist may be able to handle the dead with due reason, permission and respect. I feel we should enquire more specifically into the real attitude of modern Aborigines towards the dead, e.g. is it out of reverence for the dead, or to avoid disturbing the spirit or

releasing it on the living. During Professor Hennessy's excavation of Teleilat Ghassul, we accidentally dug into a Turkish cemetery and it was not feasible to shift the trenches. The first skeleton to appear, in what was then thought to be a Chalcolithic burial, was carefully brushed and lifted (with much loss of time) and, only after a further check on the section and on the orientation of the burial, did it become clear that we were dealing with a recent Moslem interment. Our Arab workers were asked to give the skeleton a decent reburial, with feet towards Mecca and two grave-markers. Eventually another six Turks appeared and our workers repeated the ritual with paint brush and all, just as they had seen the infidel excavators do. Time was lost and Western patience tried, but diplomacy scored admirably as our neat little cemetery expanded.

After the study of skeletal material we should give thought to their solemn reburial, with a monument and plenty of publicity. Surely casts could be made of bones where a permanent record is needed. It is a horrifying thought, even for white people, that real human bones be on display.

As it was pointed out at the ANZAAS conference, Aboriginal consultation and co-operation should be sought for exhibitions and the like - after all it is their people and their culture - otherwise we display a regrettable superior attitude and bad manners. Local communities could be encouraged (and financially assisted) to have custody of locally found artefacts and to run local museums for teaching the young and for displaying the old culture proudly to "gubs". The provision of locked storage for sacred objects has been enthusiastically received by some communities in Australia. The idea of Aboriginal rangers in national parks, especially those containing rock art, meets with general approval and only waits for general execution. These matters may concern government, rather than archaeologists, but our lobbying for them would effectively show our sincerity in regard to other Aboriginal antiquities.

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