

EDITORIAL

📖 Bruce Trigger's *Understanding Early Civilisations* is a book that every archaeologist will eventually read, like Gordon Childe's *Man makes himself*. Not that I have read it all: at 688 pages the only academics able to do this quickly will be those who are meant to be writing 600-page books of their own. But even starting at the end (like me), you experience the special pleasure of a keen intellect expressing clear ideas in a courteous and considerate manner. Trigger reviews seven selected civilisations (Akkadian, Old Kingdom, Shang, Maya, Aztec, Inka and Yoruba) in order to discover whether what they have in common transcends their idiosyncracies. As a valued pathfinder through archaeological thought Trigger has sought to loosen the grip of the processualists and the post-processualists on our subject: ("It seemed to me that research was being guided to an unhealthy extent by theoretical dogmatism" p.x), and gently bashes the heads of both: processualists have an unduly simplistic view of change while post-modernists are merely the new romantics.

He finds that all his civilisations depended on the production of surplus, had one male leader, oppressed their women, smacked their children, supported an upper class who took everything and displayed it shamelessly, and cultivated gods who required regular feeding to make them function helpfully. Moreover the peasants were strangely compliant to all this, viewing the whole enterprise as essentially in their best interests. Many of these tendencies (repeated across the globe) apparently have deep roots in biology, psychology and hormones – which he calls on us to incorporate in our new studies. By contrast, the numerous varieties of material culture, for example in art, architecture and agriculture, do not necessarily signify much originality of thought, politics or ideology. Those of us dedicated to diversity as the world's abiding asset (and see it in archaeology everywhere) get a bit of a knock here. Art might have its variants, but its underlying message is painfully repetitive: competition is inevitable and class is the consequence. There will be plenty who will point out that these similarities were embedded in the original selection, and that the "smaller scale societies" have alternative ways to conduct a less obnoxious life on earth than 'civilisation' clearly offers. Sadly, it appears that the periods of 'social generosity' (his phrase) exhibited by the small scale societies are both poorly documented and brief (unless the one also implies the other). The overview is thrilling and the challenge to post-modernism invigorating. But it appears that man did not make himself: far from calling the shots, human agency was little more than a long-legged fly on a stream of hormones. *Understanding Early Civilisations* is reviewed by Kate Spence in this issue (pp. 939–943).

📖 When academics meet they often compare the half-hearted and pragmatic Anglo-American attitude to funding academic activity (or getting it to fund itself) with the enlightened altruism of old Europe, particularly Germany, in which artists and thinkers are viewed as national treasures. Not any more. The *Senate for Research and Health* of the City of Hamburg plans to cut by half the staff in the humanities faculty of their University. This will mean a reduction from 155 to around 77 by 2012. Our correspondent writes: "Consequently many important disciplines will no longer be taught there and those departments that survive will not be able to provide a programme that meets international standards". The decision was apparently based on a calculation by a commercial consultant of the prospective demand by employers

for graduates in different subjects by 2012. The application of an equation between humanities subjects and the job market must be self-evidently dubious, but the fear is that, given Germany's economic problems, other *länder* will follow Hamburg's example.

A *Antiquity* is not about antiquities, but continues to be very concerned about their circulation. What is the relation between cultural material and the market? Readers might be interested in some recent sale prices, courtesy of the *Art Newspaper*. A Roman marble figure of a goddess (first – second century AD) was sold at Sotheby's New York on 9 June 2004 for \$209,000, and in the same session a Roman mosaic from North Africa (second century AD) went for \$299,000. On 28 April this year a Corinthian type bronze helmet (sixth – fifth century BC) from the Axel Guttman Collection of Ancient Arms and Armour fetched \$106,773. A silver-inlaid Viking sword (ninth – tenth century) sold at Christie's in London, a snip at £35,850. The Macclesfield Psalter (made in East Anglia, c. 1320–30 AD) from the Shirburn Castle library was up for auction at Sotheby's in London on 22 June 2004 where the top bidder was the Getty Museum Los Angeles at £1,685,600. However an export licence deferral has put the sale on hold while the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge attempt to raise an equivalent sum.

These are big prices, so if price reflects value, perhaps we should be gratified that the objects we study are fetching them. It must be an improvement on the Danish farmer who

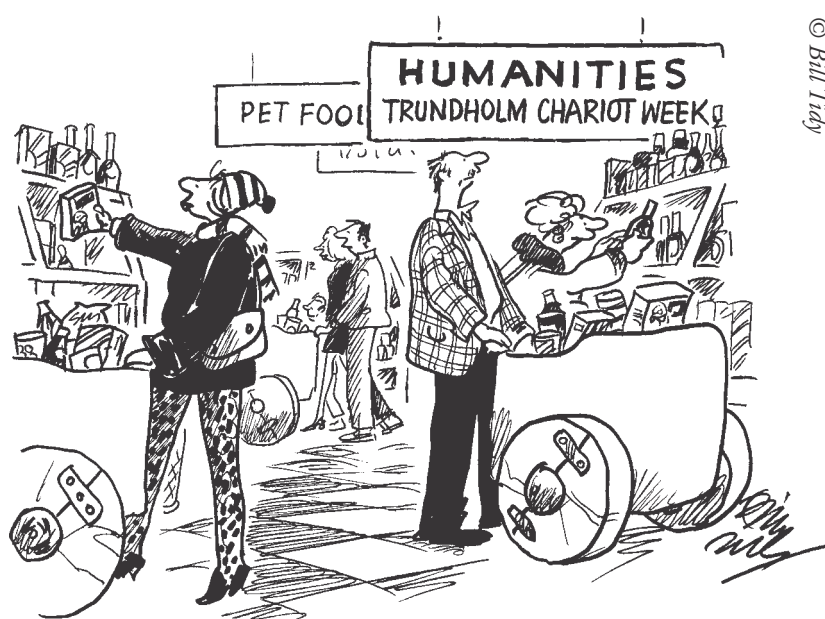


An angry flatfish in action on the border of on an illuminated folio from the Macclesfield Psalter which is currently up for sale. Courtesy of www.artfund.org.

gave the Trundholm chariot to his children to play with, or the sixteenth century English reformers who made manuscripts into gloves. But while appreciation (in all senses) has escalated, in the twenty-first century we have yet to find an effective method of sharing access to past genius, which does not involve accidents of wealth. In its annual review *The Art Newspaper* was upbeat about how museums can help: “Increasingly, museum exhibitions are exploring the creative exchanges between ancient cultures, focussing on commonality rather than conflict. Expect more international touring shows on Near Eastern and pre-Islamic cultures”. In this spirit, The British Museum and other institutions lent some Aboriginal etched barks to Australia’s Museum Victoria, but haven’t got them back; the Dja Dja Wurring community in Victoria has obtained a temporary legal block on their return. But Director Neil MacGregor is sanguine about the situation, urging that it should lead to more loans, not fewer: “Is there a chance that the Commonwealth [Government in Canberra] might take advantage of the current debate to devise a structure and a system that would enable more overseas public collections than ever to lend Aboriginal material to Australia?”. The *quid pro quo* of course is that the loan (or something comparable) be returned or reciprocated so that European children can learn about Australia, even if they cannot afford to go there.

☞ Meanwhile, over the radio comes the news that coalition forces are entering Samarra, “supported by air power”. Located 125km north of Baghdad, Samarra is one of the most important archaeological sites in the world, as well as one of the largest. Built by the Abbasid caliph al-Mu’tasim in AD 836 it was effectively deserted by 892 when the caliphate returned to Baghdad. In these two generations it produced a built-up area extending to a staggering 58 square kilometres, including an avenue 70 m wide and 7 km long running parallel to the River Tigris, flanked by palaces, mosques, barracks and the famous clover-leaf race track. A site so rapidly developed and abandoned has preserved the idea of the ninth century city imprinted in the ground; and there is still an enormous amount to learn from it. Alastair Northedge, Professor of Islamic Art and Archaeology at the Sorbonne (University of Paris I) comments “In other archaeologies, the typology of buildings may be more or less well worked out. Here it is not

Because of the short occupation.... one can be certain that each building was built for a specific purpose. Apart from the identified building types, such as mosques and houses, we do not know what those purposes were”. Alastair Northedge’s new study of Samarra is one of sixteen papers which *Antiquity* plans to publish next year as a promotional update on the archaeology of Islam. Our



feast includes Denis Genequand, B.Finster and J.Schmidt on the 'Desert Castles', Alison McQuitty on the rural landscape of Jordan, Pierre Brun on the fortifications at Merv, Ronald Hawker, Daniel Hull & Omid Rouhani on medieval air-conditioning in the Gulf, and overviews of Islamic culture and its study in Israel, Bahrain, south-east Asia, Morocco, Spain and Egypt.

☞ The death of Patrick Wormald, the innovative and inspiring Anglo-Saxon historian and archaeological sympathiser is the saddest of news. Last night I dreamt he arrived at Sutton Hoo among the figures of early England whose minds and motivation he understood so well. Raedwald, Eorpwald and Sigebert were summoned from sleep, the old hall-doors were thrown open, an ox was killed, a fire was lit, and some sparrows which had got caught eternally behind the shutters were caught with nets and roasted on spits. The drinking-horns were filled and refilled as questions rained from all sides. Spicing deep learning with gossip, Patrick explained why Aethelbert had encoded laws, why Raedwald had gone to Kent and been baptised and the reason for the frosty reception he got on his return home. Well-known saints turned out to have had elaborate sex-lives, and a mighty king had been a cobbler. The early medieval centuries were filled as never before, with hot-blooded people doing deals and nourishing ideals. Far across the River Deben the merriment was audible and the lights could be seen flickering through chinks in the walls of the timber hall – the hall of history where the master-story-teller is always welcome.

☞ This quarter we say goodbye and thank you to Kate Wescombe who helped to install *Antiquity* at York and achieve its new format. She is off to try her hand at TV scriptwriting and can be contacted through the office. She is replaced by Emily Smyth, whom readers and authors will already know as the editor of the Project Gallery. Warm thanks too to York Publishing Services who have produced the journal at York up to this issue, and to the Company of Biologists who have handled our subscriptions and distribution for many years.

Our new principal contractor is Portland Publishing of London and Colchester who are to put the journal and all the back numbers online and look after all the subscriptions. I hope readers are not too fazed by the choices and prices with which they have been confronted in their renewal notices. Every publisher we approached advised us that *Antiquity*, compared with other archaeological journals, was severely underpriced. The decision to raise the price of the printed journal from £41 to £50 was only taken after tough debate. The current situation is simply that although a nice lot of people want to publish in *Antiquity*, we need a high level of support from institutions and individuals to make it work. *Antiquity* is not a "take it or leave it" publication. We exist to serve the broad archaeology community and we need readers' consensus. Our independence is sacred and to safeguard it we must remain viable. And to remain viable we need your subscription. The simplest choice is either to stay as you are, receiving the printed journal only (£50 in the UK), or go "premium" where you can have access to every *Antiquity* that has ever been published (£76.58). Either way, do please renew and encourage a friend to do so too.

Martin Carver
York, 1 December 2004