

Antiquity

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Editorial Notes

THE Prehistoric Society of Great Britain has followed the good custom of choosing some particular aspect of archaeology for discussion at its meetings, which are spread out over three days. This gives unity to its proceedings and ensures that the discussions which ensue shall be both lively and well informed, because the meetings are attended by leading authorities on the subject selected, both native and foreign. During the last decade the Spring Conferences have been held in London in the pleasant quarters of the London University Institute of Archaeology in Regent's Park. The last meeting was held from April 15th to 17th, and the subject was 'The Reliability of Archaeological Evidence'.

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The Conference began with an address by Professor Hawkes of Oxford on 'Believing in Archaeology', and the other papers dealt with evidence from pleistocene geology and soil science, the stratigraphy of later sites (chiefly Roman and Medieval London), the statistical method in palaeolithic archaeology (in France), the reliability of excavation reports, and petrological evidence. Professor Hawkes then gave an account of the British contribution to *Inventaria Archaeologica*, a project whose first publications have already been noticed here (ANTIQUITY, xxviii, 176). Miss M. Smith discussed 'The Limitations of Inference in Archaeology' in a stimulating paper to which we shall refer again later.

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Palaeolithic archaeology is a French speciality, and it was therefore quite natural that the latest device for tabulating the types of implements should be described by its inventor, Monsieur Bordes, Chargé de Recherches at the Centre National de Recherches Scientifiques, Paris. The method is necessarily laborious; the results are expressed by means of graphs of frequency which enable the vast numbers of implements yielded by occupation sites to be handled in a way that is otherwise difficult because of their very abundance. M. Bordes showed that the personal factor in typing the implements is virtually eliminated; a test showed that the graphs of two independent examinations were practically identical. His researches on these lines are being published in *L'Anthropologie*. It will be interesting to see the method applied to other regions, periods and raw materials; there seems no reason why it should not be equally useful in the mesolithic period and in the Stone Age of America. Could it also be applied to such things as the conventional designs on rocks and pots?

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Dr Oakley described some of the problems of unravelling the sequence of river terraces and of glaciations, whose solution is the key to man's cultural evolution in Britain and in many other parts of the world ; and Dr Cornwall showed how the new technique of soil analysis can help the excavator—and how in turn the soil analyst is dependent on the excavator for providing him with carefully selected material.



Mr Grimes has been allotted the task of probing into the foundations of London. His chief discovery, in popular opinion, was the temple of Mithras and its fine sculpture ; but whereas this was the outcome of a lucky accident, his discovery of the Roman fort which explained the remarkable right-angled turn in London's north wall, was due to his meticulously careful methods of excavation, and is from a historical point of view the more important of the two. Some idea of the complications of the stratification was given by slides showing how Roman and Medieval pits and post-holes bored into the strata, reducing them to the state of a Gruyère cheese. Excavating here is what Sir Mortimer Wheeler calls 'watchmakers' work'.



Excavation reports are the foundations of archaeological knowledge ; and at a Conference devoted to the examination of foundations it was most important to discuss their strength or weakness. Mr Atkinson's contribution emphasized the fact that every excavator's report must necessarily be a selection of the observed facts, however complete the record and however careful and objective his methods. Everyone, both in excavation and in other forms of activity such as field-work, tends to see only what he expects to see or is looking for ; and there is also a risk of ignoring or underestimating the value of what one is not interested in. He cited the discovery of the axes carved on Stonehenge which he found because his interest was, for the moment, concentrated on carvings of a much later date. The evidence of excavation reports is secondary, not primary ; excavation must always destroy evidence which cannot, as in other branches of science, be consulted again ; hence there is an even greater responsibility to observe and record conscientiously. We would add that the observation of negative evidence—what is absent—is of great importance ; and it is because only the excavator himself can affirm this from his presence at the excavation that his own report is so much more valuable than can be a report written up later from his records by someone who was not present.



Miss Smith was concerned with the Limitations of Archaeological Inference, which she described as of two kinds. Inferences of the first kind are legitimate and trustworthy, as when trade relations are inferred from the distribution-map of objects (e.g. gold lunulae) ; those of the second are not. She illustrated her argument by citing an inference that excavators have made—that in a hut village the biggest hut must have belonged to the chief ; it might also have been a shrine or a place of assembly. (As an example of similar inferences she might have quoted those drawn from the 'Royal Tombs' at Ur). Even more perilous was the inference of political facts from type-distributions.



It is always stimulating to listen to criticism of accepted beliefs, provided of course there is, as here, complete freedom of discussion ; a stringent criticism tightens up our mental processes and is a cure for loose thinking, even if we do not wholly assent to it.

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Miss Smith has a good case, but one felt that the other side might be able to put up quite a good defence. What, for instance, have anthropologists to say on the 'big hut' problem? Have they indeed ever recorded any observations pertinent to it? It is the fashion nowadays to decry anthropological parallels; we think it a silly fashion, though admittedly the comparisons must be made warily and whenever possible within the same restricted culture-circle.



Some of the most dangerous inferences, we would add, are those made about primitive religious practices. Everyone knows that when an excavator or museum curator is puzzled he can always explain a useless-looking object either as intended for some religious purpose or as 'horse-trappings'. An hypothetical example from modern practice was cited in the discussion. In the semi-desert island of Fuerteventura, the arable fields are separated by very low walls only, that any sheep or goat can easily cross. Not all are under crops at all times, so that the little herds of these animals can often browse on them with impunity. When a crop has been sown, in order to indicate the fact to the herdsmen (usually quite young children), small piles of single flat stones are set at regular intervals along the walls. They then know that they must not let the animals stray into these fields. How difficult it would be for an excavator to explain these little piles! And how tempting here would be the resort to a 'religious (or magical) purpose'.



Excavations at Silchester, Hampshire, are now being arranged for September 1955. Whereas much is known of the buildings, plan, and defences of the Roman cantonal capital, little is known of its foundation and the pre-Roman settlement which preceded it. The site is *Calleva Atrebatum*, the capital of the British tribe of the Atrebates, whose dynasty of Belgic princes can be traced back to Commius, ally and later enemy of Julius Caesar. Silchester is known to have been occupied at least as early as A.D. 10 because there are Ancient British coins of that date bearing the name of the city. There is besides a considerable amount of pre-Roman material in the great Silchester Collection at Reading Museum; but neither this nor the coins can be referred to any structures or levels on the site itself.

Recently however in an aerial survey, Dr St. Joseph discovered a buried defensive system which when tested in a preliminary excavation last year, proved to be of considerable dimensions and of earlier date than any of the other three defences. There seemed in fact good hope that further work would be able to prove that the new defences were those of the long sought Belgic settlement. The enclosure seems to be nearly as large as the later Roman city (100 acres) and the new defences are polygonal with inturned entrances.



In the work which is planned for September, fresh sections will be cut across the new defences in an attempt to date them more conclusively, and search will be made for contemporary occupation inside. A Committee has been formed to superintend the work. Its Chairman is Mrs M. A. Cotton, who excavated at Silchester in 1938-9; the Treasurer is Colonel C. N. Rivers-Moore of Remenham Hill House, Henley, Berks., to whom contributions may be sent; and the Secretary and Director of excavations is Mr George C. Boon of Reading Museum. We wish them success in their undertaking.