

THE PRESENT STATE OF ARCHAEOLOGY: AN INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN CARVER

El presente de la Arqueología: entrevista a Martin Carver

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(Martin Carver)*



Prof. Martin Carver.

Professor Martin Carver is one of the most renowned archaeologists not only in England, where he holds his position, but in Europe. Although he started his career as an army officer (reaching the rank of captain), he got his postgraduate in the University of Durham in Anglo-Saxon Studies in 1973.

After that, he developed a successful career both in the academy and field archaeology. The latter has taken him to important excavations such as Castel Seprio (Italia), Achir (Algeria), the monastery of Portmahomack, and maybe the

best known, the royal tomb of Sutton Hoo, whose project was developed between 1983 and 2005.

In line with his archaeological experience, he has been professor in prestigious universities such as Birmingham University and the University of York, becoming Professor Emeritus in 2008. With more than a hundred publications, including the recent *Archaeological investigation* published by Routledge, his current principal activity is being Editor of the important journal *Antiquity*.

1. After an extensive career in Archaeology, which challenges do you think Archaeology must face in the 21st century? Can Archaeology still just be a tool to understand past societies?

Yes, archaeology is a tool to understand past societies, bring them to life and show that their experience is relevant, and often inspiring, for us today. The challenge is to show the rest of society that this ability to win knowledge is our principal asset. In particular, the challenge is to join the two parts of the enterprise, university and commercial researchers into a single profession, like architecture.

I've been active in both parts and campaigned all my life to bring them together. So far with very little success. So I'm relying on the next generation!

2. Since the 90's, Archaeology has been inserted in a deep debate about its epistemological, methodological and theoretical roots. Which are, in your opinion, the current main theoretical and methodological problems of Archaeology?

I see the theoretical debates of the past 30 years as interesting and useful, in that they have introduced archaeologists to methods of interpretation drawn from science and social science (processualism), anthropology (structuralism) and literature (reflexivity, multivocality). This all helps us understand better where we are in the intellectual forum and teaches us to argue better with our own colleagues.

However the true originality of our subject lies in its fieldwork; everything else is second hand. Field archaeology has its own epistemological, methodological and theoretical roots, and they can be summed up in one word: "design". Design is the great liberator. It enables archaeologists to create great archaeology just as it allows a film director to create great films and an architect to create great buildings.

3. In 21st century context, which are the main problems that Archaeology has to face up to? Field work? Legislation? Showing and communicating our work and results to society?

All of these. In fieldwork, we need to be conscious of the new nano-techniques. In Legislation, we need to convince society they are paying for new knowledge, not preservation by record or conserving monuments. 'Heritage' is a big distraction from the true business of making the past matter. Communication needs huge improvement: we need to produce films, novels and above all children's books. All this

should raise the profile of the profession and ensure it is better paid.

4. The first decades of the 21st century are going to be remembered as the "times of the crisis". A crisis that has affected all workers and professions. Which effects does the current economical crisis have in archaeological research and companies? Does the crisis have any impact within Archaeology departments in universities? Has it affected to financing and investment in research?

I'm not sure how much of this crisis is real and how much is a convenience for the press and employers wishing to trim. In UK, commercial archaeology has become big business and behaves like big business. The smaller companies have cash-flow problems and go bankrupt and the bigger companies buy them up. The bigger companies go international by tendering abroad (e.g. Oxford Archaeology in France and China). This is all in the spirit of international capitalism. The banking crisis has accelerated the anxiety; there is less building. But the job losses recently published were only 7% i.e. the same as most other businesses and probably similar to archaeology most of the time – it has a steady leakage to other professions as people pull out in their 30s.

The UK universities are recruiting more than ever. The system of undergraduate loans has not (yet) affected archaeology, and I'm not sure why it should. It gives students more choice to study what they want, since they only pay back in proportion to what they earn, much later. The real danger to the health of archaeology is that young people entering the commercial sector aren't allowed to do research. As Paul Everill's thesis showed¹, that's why they leave, rather than low pay.

1 EVERILL, P. (2009): *The invisible diggers; a study of British commercial archaeology*. Oxbow Books

Investment in research is higher than ever. The European Research council has €60m a year to spend on archaeological research projects. I've never known it so high. However application to the fund is very uneven. Those countries with a culture of design have a great advantage in the competition.

5. One of the topics Arkeogazte is very interested in is the relation that Archaeology can have with society. Do you think that academic Archaeology is really linked to society? Why?

Academic archaeology is closely linked to society because many students do it at university and very rarely lose their interest, even if they embark on quite different careers. Good academics spend a lot of time lecturing to the public.

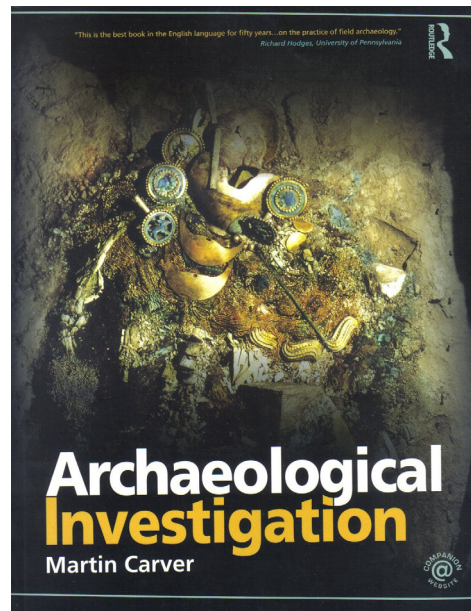
We have to cope with a lot of negative publicity too, such as TV programmes fronted by condescending celebrities. This makes us look a bit silly. But we could counter this by writing and filming more ourselves. Now we have the web and youtube, ordinary but creative archaeologists could promote their subject as never before. Why don't we? And I don't mean ponderous blogs or footage of people trowelling - but real story-telling. For a model from China see the documentary "4000 years underground / Chinese Xia Dynasty"².

6. In which ways do you think Archaeology can be useful to society?

Environmentally - by showing how people coped in the past and came through.

Socially and politically - by showing that humans have evolved very little from primates competing for resources and enjoying violence. Time we changed!

² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgPpLVz83OA&NR=1>



"Archaeological investigation is one of Carver's latest books

Spiritually - by showing that the wide variety of religions all have a social and psychological basis. The uplifting effect of religion is lost through competition between them.

Economically - by showing that numerous systems for winning prosperity have been tried and none of them is foolproof.

In brief, archaeology can show society that it doesn't have to stay locked in a cycle of dogma and violence. Quite useful, I would say.

7. During your career, you have worked in numerous places all over the world. One of the topics you usually work on is the introduction of society in archaeological research processes, how can archaeologist introduce people's and local communities' thoughts in the archaeological research? Which ones are the most efficient ways of transferring our results?

The short answer is 'through design'. People, especially local people, need to be 'designed in' to the project, rather than designed out of it. The

social context of a project is one of design's key factors these days. Within the design we need to include learning about the local terrain and what happened to it, deciding how to present the project proposals to local people; working out how local people, especially the local archaeology groups, can be involved in the project, scheduling regular reports to the local people and press. Most archaeologists do all this already, but we could help the profile of the profession by making the involvement of local people a regular part of commercial archaeology projects too. We need to convince planners and developers that local involvement gives a project 'added value'.

8. From the very beginning of the discipline, British archaeologists have always been a reference, carrying out work all over the world; but this has also had negative effects. What is your opinion about the countries that are asking European governments to give them back archaeological materials that are nowadays in European museums?

Museums should give things back if they turn out to be stolen, as the Getty has. But otherwise I would like to get away from the idea of ownership, either by a collector or by a country. The emphasis should be on who has the duties of custodian and on making sure that all the most interesting artefacts travel from museum to museum throughout the world. Private money could be very useful in making this happen rather than buying antiquities.

9. The Spanish educational system has recently adapted itself to a new model which was supposed to be based in the British one. Currently, how is Archaeology set out in British universities? Do you think that it is an adequate education for the training of future archaeologists?

Undergraduates in Britain do a three-year course which is a study of archaeology for its own sake. It is a useful all purpose degree,



The mask of Sutton Hoo, site excavated by Carver.

popular because it combines arts and science. Most do not become archaeologists and do not expect to. A lot of ours seem to go into advertising (why?).

A small fraction then do a one-year post graduate course either to prepare them for a research career (MA by Research) or to prepare them for a career in the commercial sector (e.g. MA in the Archaeology of Buildings). These courses cost around £10,000 and about half of the students have to find their own money. The rest get grants.

Some of those doing an MA by Research go into the commercial sector. Others go on to do a PhD. This is a career choice, but the student is usually chosen by the university not the other way round. That is because most can't afford to do a PhD unless they get a grant. This is the same system as the Italian *borsa* I think.



Excavations at Sutton Hoo.

The weakness in the British system comes at the end of the PhD. Whereas Italian students have entered the academic profession as soon as they have won their *borsa*, in England the newly graduated PhDs have to start looking for work all over again and it depends a lot on luck. British universities are trying to bridge the gap by making sure that there are post-doctoral posts in all their new research projects.

Apart from this, I think it's a pretty good system.

10. You are the current editor of the journal *Antiquity*. Could you give us an evaluation of this experience?

Editing *Antiquity* is the best job in archaeology. You get to see most of the world's new research and have a strong sense that we understand more every year. You have the best possible platform for telling the rest of society about archaeology and for telling archaeologists about each other.

For me, an *ignoramus* with no archaeology degree, this has been the best possible education.

More surprising perhaps is the fact that you have to run a business, since *Antiquity* is its own publisher and completely independent of government, any learned society and all the large consortia – probably the only archaeology journal that is. However being an independent amongst all these giants is pretty tough – like being a goldfish in a tank full of sharks. This was the tricky part – but luckily I had lots of good advice and we have remained solvent.

Apart from that, the thing I am most proud of is broadening our authors and readers to include African and Far Eastern archaeologists. A lot was achieved through the web site and the open access Project gallery. A few years ago indigenous African archaeologists won the prize for best article of the year for the first time. I have also published research from Russia, China and South-East Asia, including the first Vietnamese author. I feel this all helps to make archaeology truly global.

11. Can you give some advice to young researchers in archaeology for their future career in Archaeology?

The first thing is: only do archaeology if you really like it and think it matters. You'll know at the end of your degree if you feel this way. If you don't, there are plenty of other careers in which an archaeology degree will prove useful.

Becoming an archaeologist is a vocation not a career. In practice there are many ways of earning a living as an archaeologist, including being self-employed. You can also do archaeology if you are not employed, or are employed to do something else. There is the whole world to explore and all time; it cannot be boring. Look at it this way and it's like painting or music or sports – you may always

remain an amateur, but that doesn't mean you don't love it - just the opposite.

Armed with this feeling - "I like this subject and no-one can take that away" you can survey the landscape of paid archaeology and get to know it: government, university, the commercial sector, self-employment. None of these has primacy in our subject. Don't think about status; think about what you really like doing. If digging, dig; if surveying, survey; if looking at objects, look at objects; if writing, write; if filming, film; if teaching, teach. This will help you seek out your preference: civil servant in charge of heritage, museum curator, university teacher, commercial excavator. But if you don't get a foot on the ladder straightaway, don't worry, apply for everything, it's all good experience.

When you are interviewed, whatever you say the panel will notice what really excites you – and if it's what they want, that's what will get you the job.

I do agree that the "landscape of paid archaeology" is quite an uneven one, but quite extensive – so it's good if you are willing to travel. Spain is an exceedingly nice place - but experience of other terrain will always stand you in good stead.

I was impressed by the students at Vitoria-Gasteiz - there was plenty of vivacity and initiative and interest there, and I am sure that those who want to will successfully go professional. If anything I've said has made you curious, there is a discussion of all this in my new book, if you'll allow me to advertise it. It's called *Making Archaeology Happen* and it will be published by Left Coast Press fairly soon.

Thanks again for your hospitality and your invitation to do this interview.

Martin Carver