

Antiquity

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Editorial Notes

RATHER unwillingly we feel impelled to call attention to a serious state of affairs in the world of archaeology, namely, unpublished excavations. This is a matter which concerns us all, whether we ourselves direct the excavations or whether, as members of the general public, we provide the money (and nowadays often the labour too) for carrying them out; and it also concerns the Governments and archaeological bodies which administer the funds. No country is guiltless in the matter, but some are more guilty than others, whether through their Governments or by the default of individual excavators. The British Government has done much to atone for its past shortcomings in publishing a magnificent volume on the work done at Jarlshof, in Shetland, by the Ancient Monuments Division of the Ministry of Works (*Excavations at Jarlshof*, by J. R. C. Hamilton, H.M. Stationery Office, £3 3s.); in one of our next numbers we shall publish an article in which Sir Mortimer Wheeler will review this book. Thus rather belatedly we fall into step with those other countries which have for long past published similar official reports.



But those foreign volumes do not cover more than a very few of the actual excavations carried out. The store-rooms of museums in various parts of the world are crammed with crates of objects from excavations, mouldering unseen and unpublished. Excavators go from one site to another without leaving themselves time to prepare proper reports. The same thing happens (with more excuse) in the case of overworked officials of, for example, the Italian and Greek archaeological services, who often simply have not the time to write their reports because of their multifarious administrative duties. They are called in quick succession from one site to another, from a medieval site perhaps to a neolithic one of entirely different character and presenting wholly different problems. However anxious to do what is required, they are unable to cope. Each year the Greek archaeological service publishes summaries of work done under its auspices; but these are necessarily short and not fully illustrated or documented. Similar summaries appear in English under the title *Archaeology in Greece*, prepared by the British School at Athens and published as a supplement to the *Journal of Hellenic Studies*. Similar summaries in French are published in the *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique*, and (for Italy) in German in the *Archäologischer Anzeiger*. For fuller reports of Greek excavations we must consult the official publications, but those published usually fall far behind the best modern standards, and of course many excavations (and not always those which are the most interesting) never see the light of day even in this form.

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Many of the most important excavations in Greece are conducted by the foreign Schools, to whom have been conceded the rights of excavation at some of the greatest sites—the Germans at Olympia and Samos; the French at Delos, Delphi, Thasos, and now Argos; the Americans in the Athenian Agora and the neighbourhood of Corinth. These great digs are on the whole adequately published, though often very slowly; and there are usually short annual reports. The definitive publications vary greatly, both in technical skill and in adequacy. The best up to date are undoubtedly those of the Germans at Olympia and the Americans in the Agora; and the French publications of architecture on their sites set a very high standard.



The trouble is that there is too much unnecessary digging—far more than can ever be properly used and digested. (By ‘unnecessary’ is meant digging on unthreatened sites.) The obvious remedy is for the authority sponsoring the work always to make provision for its full publication. It is not enough to subsidize an excavation; you must also subsidize its publication, and stipulate for it in drawing up the programme.



That great pioneer archaeologist, Sir Flinders Petrie, had some wise words to say about all this in a now almost forgotten (but still topical) book written more than half a century ago: ‘To turn over a site without making any plans, or recording the positions and relations of things, may be plundering, but it is not archaeology. To remove and preserve only the pretty and interesting pieces, and leave the rest behind unnoticed, and separated from what gave them a value and a meaning, proves the spirit of a dealer and not that of a scholar. To leave a site merely plundered, without any attempt to work out its history, to see the meaning of the remains found, or to publish what may serve future students of the place or the subject, is to throw away the opportunities which have been snatched from those who might have used them properly.’ After a sentence on incompetent excavators, he concludes that it is ‘far better to let things lie a few centuries longer under the ground, if they can be let alone, than repeat the vandalisms of past ages without the excuse of being a barbarian’ (*Methods and Aims in Archaeology*, Methuen, 1904, pp. 179–180).



Petrie was writing, of course, with Egypt foremost in his mind, and with the knowledge of how that land had suffered from treasure-hunters and tomb-robbers. In what we have said above we have been thinking rather of publication than of excavation methods. There has been an enormous advance in the latter and Petrie himself led the way to it. But his words are not wholly inapplicable to some modern excavations. One wonders what he would have thought about the remarks of a recent reviewer of Monsieur Ghirshmann’s report of his excavations in Iran (Village Perse-Achéménide); ‘The author has made the most of every piece of evidence, and the few technical omissions such as lack of a section, lack of scale on many of his photographs and some of the drawings, and lack of a key on the plans, do not seriously detract from the overall value of the volume’. Then what would?

EDITORIAL NOTES

The first article in this number of *ANTIQUITY* contains what journalists call 'hot news' of a startling new discovery ; we wish to thank Professor Cyrus Gordon, of Brandeis University, for giving our readers the first results of his latest researches. Briefly, they consist in the deciphering of those hitherto undeciphered Cretan tablets written in the script called Linear A, with the result that some of the words appear to belong to a Semitic language. Readers will remember that the other Cretan tablets, called Linear B, have recently been deciphered by the late Michael Ventris, who has proved that their language is an early form of Greek—an Indo-European language. Some of the Linear B signs are the same as some of the Linear A ones ; and with the help of these and the small conventional signs of pots and suchlike which accompany the words, Professor Gordon has succeeded in deciphering them. Thanks to his well-known work on the Ras Shamra texts, and on other Semitic ones, he has unlocked another door that had been closed for nearly half a century. Naturally his article is written in a style that will be better understood by specialists than by the general reader ; that is inevitable in the first scholarly publication of a new discovery like this. We know, however, from the letters we get that our readers do not object to a certain mixture of specialist and general articles in the same number, for we have to cater for a large and varied public. It is not often that we are so lucky as to be able to publish the first news of so important a discovery as this—one which will certainly inaugurate a long series of discussions.