

Antiquity

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Editorial Notes

ANTIQUITY started as the private venture of a particular person, but he would never have started it if he had not felt that others beside himself needed an organ to express their point of view and to publish the cream of their researches. ANTIQUITY thus became, quite naturally and informally, the organ of the then younger generation, consisting of alert-minded students who were creating new implements of research and using them to give substance and form to prehistory. That phase is now nearly over in Britain, but in some other countries it has hardly begun. A few years ago one might have said that it had not begun; recently however a few European archaeologists, working independently, have begun to raise the standard of research to a higher level. This journal would like to call attention to their work from time to time.



The archaeology of a country may be judged both by the way in which its excavations are conducted and published, and by its museums. The writer of these Notes has recently seen something of the museums of France, Italy and Greece, and the impression left upon him is an unfavourable one. Take for example the Louvre, one of the most famous of all national museums. The contents are artistically fine and are often well displayed; at least one does not, as in some of the Breton museums, require a torch to see the objects. But the labelling is deplorable; the Etruscan Room, for instance, has none at all, except that a case containing Greek, Italian and Roman weapons is labelled 'Armes grecques, italiotes et romaines'. No provenance, no dates, nothing to help the visitor. In the Egyptian Department is a room with four cases containing more than a hundred objects all unlabelled. Some wooden objects are assigned to 'the 1st Theban Epoch', a description that conveys nothing to anyone but an Egyptologist. At the entrance to the rooms on the 1st floor is a painted iron plaque setting out the periods of Egyptian history, and the rooms assigned to them; the 'Theban Epoch' is not mentioned. To these examples, chosen more or less at random, could be added many others not only from the Louvre but also from many other famous European museums.



This absence of labels is a fundamental defect because an object without provenance or date is of little archaeological value even when it may be pleasing as a work of art. Yet a large proportion of the contents of many famous museums are unlabelled, nor do those responsible for this neglect of their duty seem conscious of sin. The Vatican Treasury contains priceless exhibits but almost nothing to tell the visitor what they are. The Prehistoric Museum in Rome is dustier and shabbier but otherwise in much the same state as when the writer made notes there in 1909. The Keramikos Museum at Athens

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does not contain a single label. It is no excuse to plead that only specialists need labels, for when a specialist does visit the museum the curator may be away or he may forget to bring the key (this has happened). That kind of thing occurs regularly in Italy where locked cases and lost keys are quite common. Everyone knows this and it is a frequent subject of sardonic comment when archaeologists meet and exchange experiences; but the facts are not often mentioned in print for fear of retaliation. Now that a few individuals are trying to improve things it is time to speak up and show that they have the support of their colleagues elsewhere. The present writer has suffered in silence for nearly half a century.



There was a time when hard things could have been said of many British museums, but not now. Some of the best museum technique is to be seen in our Wessex museums; here, as in the excavation which preceded, General Pitt-Rivers long ago showed the way in his museum at Farnham in Cranbourne Chase, Dorset. There the chief feature is the models of his excavations, and it is these which provide a clue to some of the shortcomings just criticized, in so far as these are not due to plain idleness and incompetence. We think some defects are the result of an unnatural separation from field-work, especially from properly conducted excavations. Where these are carried out and there is a good liaison, there you will be likely to find adequate labelling, supplemented by photographs of sites, plans and models. The National Museum at Leiden in Holland is a good example of this liaison, and of course there are many others.



It must be remembered that modern archaeology is a much newer thing than many museums, for most of them were founded in the days when excavation consisted mainly of grave-robbing and treasure-hunting. Some allowance must be made for this legacy from the past, for which the present curators cannot be held responsible; many objects reached the museums from dealers and collectors, without history or provenance. Museums thus afflicted can only be cured by a major operation called the Clean Sweep. Examples of the Clean Sweep and its good effects may be seen in the Salisbury and Nicosia Museums.



It follows as a natural corollary that the best and liveliest museums are to be found where modern methods of research, especially of excavation, prevail. Much could, and should, be done to improve labelling, even where field-work lags behind; but one can hardly expect to find a good, well-arranged group of exhibits where there have been no properly conducted excavations. A beginning is being made in France, Belgium and Italy, but it will be some time yet before the results can become apparent. A rich harvest is awaiting those who bring modern techniques to the excavation of sites, especially inhabited sites, in Mediterranean lands. There the stage of wholesale clearance is being succeeded by one of carefully conducted digging planned to achieve a limited objective. (Perhaps we should say 'supplemented' rather than 'succeeded', because the *complete* excavation of a site is still a most necessary thing). Professor Bernabo Brea, Director of Antiquities in Sicily, has already led the way at Arène Candide and more recently at the citadel of Lipari, where excavations (still in progress) have revealed stone houses of the Early Bronze Age with Mycenaean pottery imported from Greece or the Aegean. The

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potsherds are associated with local wares, so that we have at last a firmly fixed dating-point for prehistoric material in the central and western Mediterranean. Hard on the heels of this achievement comes the subdivision of Maltese prehistory into distinct periods, made possible by two things—the existence of stratified deposits, and the scientific excavation thereof. The famous megalithic monuments of the Maltese islands can now be seen to have developed from a primitive trefoil plan into one more elaborate. In their latest form they are regarded as temples; but ‘the earliest in the series are morphologically far closer to megalithic tombs than the later ones’. Many readers will have heard about these excavations from the broadcasts of Dr Ward-Perkins and Mr John D. Evans, published in the *Listener* (3 June and 22 July), and from that of Professor Piggott (delivered on 25 July).



While these excavations were being carried out in Malta others of the same precise kind, directed at a clearly envisaged target, were being made at Stonehenge, a contemporary megalithic temple. Each set of excavations is typical of the way we attack a problem to-day. Both at Stonehenge and at Malta there had been previous digging, but it had left many problems unsolved. Worse than that, it had inevitably destroyed evidence. At Stonehenge by a wise provision one half of the area of the circle had been deliberately left undug, so that future excavators whose technique was more advanced might have scope for applying it. In Malta no such provision was made, but fortunately not every cubic foot was dug up; and for this intensive digging quite a small block of undisturbed stratification is enough, thanks to the abundance of potsherds. (Professor Blegen was faced by exactly the same problem at Troy, and solved it by similar methods.) The museums at Farnham and Salisbury reflect this careful scientific excavation; there is in fact a direct link between the excavations of General Pitt-Rivers and those now in progress at Stonehenge, for all Wessex diggers are proud to acknowledge their debt to the great pioneer.



The excavations at Malta have already produced important results of a more theoretical kind. ‘We can state with fair confidence’, says Mr Evans, ‘that the temples themselves cover a period of about 500 years, from just before 2000 to about 1500 B.C.’ The earliest pottery in Malta (from the cave of Dalam) ‘is identical with that of the earliest neolithic inhabitants of Sicily, and suggests that the Maltese islands were first colonized from there by primitive farmers late in the third millennium B.C.’ This is the first time, we think, that the origin of food-production in the western Mediterranean has ever been mentioned. We do not remember to have read any discussion of the route by which food-production spread westwards across the Mediterranean. How did the knowledge of agriculture (and the necessary seed) first reach Italy, Sicily, Malta, northwest Africa and Spain? What, for instance, was happening in Algeria and Tunisia during the Late Neolithic and Bronze Ages? Is the gap in our knowledge real and due to absence of evidence, or is it merely the result of French concentration on flints? We ask these rhetorical questions in the hope of calling attention to a neglected line of research. So far as northwest Africa is concerned we would suggest that a start might be made by a survey on modern lines of the megalithic burial-chambers and rock-cut tombs near Constantine, looted during the 19th century.