The Problem with Progress in Irish Archaeology

To fully realise potential of Irelands archaeological record and to transform our understanding of how society in Ireland has evolved, a National Archaeological Research Programme is required. Such a programme will provide a sharpened research focus for archaeological activity, thus fostering greater integration and information flow within the profession. *(Excerpt from A Review of Research Needs in Irish Archaeology, 2007, Heritage Council.)*

In the Winter '08 issue of this quarterly Landry helpfully drew our attention to the theoretical deficiencies in the National Archaeological Research Programme (NARP). In this article, I suggest these diverse failures to have a single origin, philosophy, an identification I believe explains their universality, their subtlety and why they demand an exclusively philosophical resolution. Hence, this policy review document not only expresses where Irish archaeology is considered to be failing, but also exhibits symptoms characteristic of this failure itself, the absence of philosophy in a national archaeological research plan being the most salient. In archaeology, philosophy is generally poorly understood, regarded as contentious and is ignored. But, if our problems originate with philosophy, we may recognise that solution must begin with philosophy, an argument suggesting that if we simply add philosophy to existing research categories, the NARP may yet be made the architect of its own success.

Increasing integration and information flow would of course have many beneficial effects, allowing data integration, enabling (digital) information handling and conversion into knowledge **(Kintigh 2006)**. These may seem reasonable goals, but they are not easily reached, like distant mountains, however close they *seem* the difficulties between us and our destination remain unknown. In a new and uncharted landscape of knowledge only philosophy can illuminate the way forward. But philosophy is absent in the NARP.

To create knowledge, we must first be able to handle data, to do this, we must have a conceptual model representing this data. If this model is coherent or philosophically integrated, then our data can be integrated. If it is not, then this integration is impossible. Here we have a problem, archaeology is philosophically fragmented. The subjects position, awkwardly spanning the separation of the sciences and humanities has created deep disjuncture, shattering the coherence of the discipline. In what has become an increasingly bitter ideological battle, archaeologists choose sides, those engaged in philosophy retreating from engagement with fieldwork. In this way theory finds a home mainly in the academy, remaining largely ignored as impractical and therefore irrelevant by field archaeologists. Strangely, both views are basically correct.

It is correct to say there is no theory underpinning the discipline **(Johnson, 2008) a**nd equally correct to say that practice without theory is compromised**.** What is termed theory is in fact hypotheses or opinion, and so fieldwork is indeed an act ungoverned by theory. Without theory, opinion is currently the source template for inference, the core process of archaeological work. And, considering that our choices about where to dig, how to dig and what to record rely on this, we may see that our inferential framework is not just compromised, it does not even exist. So, the quality of our choices is ultimately dependent on the quality of our philosophy. But philosophy is absent in the NARP.

To illustrate our subjects current theoretical position, we may compare archaeology with biology before the publication of Darwins' Origin of Species in 1859. At this early stage, biologists could describe and catalogue life in exemplary detail, but were at a loss to explain the mechanism of the generation of species. They had no theory of change. Unable to generate evolutionary hypotheses, biology lacked explanatory power. Archaeology, similarly bereft of theory, has no theory of change and cannot generate hypotheses, leading to a discipline that, as Colin Renfrew has pointed out, can catalogue much, but explain little **(Renfrew, 2004).** In this way, philosophical weakness, its expression universal, underlies many of the most serious problems in archaeology**.**

What does this mean for the aims of the NARP? Because this breakdown is at a level underlying data we can predict that access to higher levels of abstraction, such as knowledge, cannot be attained. The last 15 years, after thousands of excavations costing millions of euro has fully revealed our severely limited ability to manage the data, let alone create knowledge. The increasing volume of the record has highlighted theoretical problems, but cannot solve them. The fact is, as long as data integration remains *theoretical* in aspiration, it is beyond our practical capabilities to implement. The creation of knowledge will therefore require us to address these systemic problems first, implying revision of our subjects philosophy. But philosophy is absent from the NARP.

As the aims of the Review can only be realised with the achievement of an integrated theory and practice, philosophy must be pursued for practical reasons, for if we achieve conceptual integration, practical integration becomes possible, along with the progress that this entails. Each time this has occurred before, it heralds the birth of new fields of science. Therefore, if we are serious about solving our difficulties, we must constitute this subject, the Philosophy of Archaeology, place it parallel to existing research categories and regard it as the central pillar and sole instrument of reform for a new and better Irish archaeology.

References

Landry, Alexis, 2008 A Vision for the future or a Manifesto for the Thought Police. Archaeology Ireland, Wordwell, Dublin.

Heritage Council, 2007 A Review of Research Needs in Irish Archaeology, Dublin, The Heritage Council.

Johnson, M. H. 2006, On the nature of theoretical archaeology and archaeological theory. Archaeological Dialogues 13 (2) 117–132, Cambridge University Press

Kadar, Manuella, Data Modelling And Relational Database Design in Archaeology. unpub. doctoral thesis.

Kintigh, K. (Editor) 2006, The Promise and Challenge of Archaeological Data Integration, () American Antiquity, 71(3),, pp. 567-578.

Renfrew C. 2004, Towards a theory of material engagement. In: DeMarrais E, Gosden C, Renfrew C, editors. Rethinking materiality, Cambridge: McDonald Institute; p. 23–32.g