

On Magi

Nigel and I had many wide-ranging discussions. Sometimes we spoke in depth about archaeology and his particular field of ceramics. More often than not this was returned to after a series of long digressions, lasting months or years.

I am not an archaeologist. By a turn of fortune, I have been able to emulate being an archaeologist for 25 years. I did this by reading every work I could find on methodology and adopting the most efficient and logical into my performance. By temperament I am Newtonian in my application of method. Observe the orbit of one sphere and all others can be derived from process and method. Turn the handle on the archaeology machine and solid predictable results will flow. Like Newton I became interested in the work of alchemists, people who applied themselves to some work which produced a visible result, but whose method and underlying process was not visible. The archaeological world I entered had many such alchemists, whose individual toiling produced a result that could be strapped on to mule carrying the results of an investigation but could not be built into a machine. Individual minds ploughing individual furrows.

Like Newton, I became interested in the hidden forces behind the phenomena, the links of process behind each of the alchemist's method. I realised the value of the atoms of archaeology, the interlinked relationships between elements of common materials. I also saw the power that these had to produce new information, if the results could be integrated within the whole investigation. Of course, the basic atomic unit of explanation in the field archaeology I experienced were ceramics, durable ubiquitous and full of sequential potential. But how was the magic of reading this material achieved? Here we moved from the general alchemists to the Magi, great personalities with great, and difficult to understand, powers.

I met Nigel in 2003, in the Trust's old headquarters at Crampton Tower. Our discourse began. I observed his ways. His table top games of lay out the 'sherd'. His tippy tap on the sherd with specially extended fingernail and occasionally taking a pair of pliers to some unfortunate sherd. Pacing. Incantation. Pronouncement of personal knowledge of a sherd, or that a sherd or assemblage had the quality of being 'gutty'. Consultation in the books of Lore. The end result, a list of dates that we could feed as fuel into our machine, and a long screed of text only other Magi could interpret and there were few to consult and none tame enough to provide interpretation. The texts contained idiosyncratic forms of punctuation, phraseology that was dense and formatting that was uniquely unsuitable to mechanical reproduction or interpretation.

Once in later years, I witnessed two Magi in a territorial battle of wills. A site in Thanet with prehistoric origins extending into the Roman period. Two texts were produced, one a spot date and text on prehistoric pottery by Nigel and one on the Roman pottery by Malcolm Lyne. Ever cautious Nigel wanted to consult with his fellow Magi to see if their magic had similar product. A gentle, gentlemanly struggle over territory ensued. This is a prehistoric product which extends into the Roman period. This same piece is a Roman product with prehistoric origins. I observed that different Magi spoke of the same things using different languages.

Ever Newtonian and sceptical, I mulled over this meeting and my experience with the product of their wizardry, until in one of our discussions I confronted Nigel in my best H.G. Wells style. 'Damn it man, I am a man of science not given to flights of fancy, but I do not understand your methods. I see you perform your rituals and cannot believe that, like Prospero, you are able to call forth airy spirits to do your work. I cannot conceive that there is a supernatural origin to the product that we use as

fuel for the archaeology machine. Science and Magi do not mix'. Something to that effect anyway. Nigel got it, understanding and engaging with the point I was making.

On reflection I perceived that his powers as a Magus were a product of his experience. He began as a pioneer, building the early bodies of knowledge and systematised collections of material from the growing number of archaeological excavations. He became part of pioneering organisations, building knowledge from the ground up. I came to realise the Nigel was a full body archaeologist, he grew with his material, he lived with his material over extended periods. His habits were habits formed by his material. His sense of time and place were directed by his material. His mysterious mutterings and greetings to unknown sherds were memory methods that helped him sift that body of experiential evidence to find the rightful place for each item. Each sherd embodied a living world of material, producer, consumer, exchange, loss and decomposition. How does one convey all that resonance if not through a specialised verbal language and a language of structured behaviour. The whole output from this level of immersion amounts to what one philosopher has called 'Effing the Ineffable', attempting to put in ordinary language an extraordinary experience.

I came to understand that Nigel's methods were Newtonian, they did produce consistent predictable knowledge, but were derived from an immersive process, one which no other living person could now share. He had no book of principles to operate from, he embodied his methods and his assumptions were contained in his processes. Nigel had travelled so far in the cloak of the magus, he was not himself able to recognise the simple needs of the beginner on the road.

Nigel was desperate to share his knowledge, as well as his reason for being, trying to understand this material as fully as a human could. He recognised the finite nature of his capacities and was happy to do what he could to share his knowledge, although this was not a straightforward thing to do. He tried to pass on his method to others and took on many followers and a long-standing apprentice to learn many of his ways.

But for me, a new magus would not substitute for a scientific revolution. We needed to observe the rituals and procedures to see how they created a result. We needed to distil repeatable scientific methods from the magic. In my view, what was needed were basic tools for understanding, so we could democratise the power of the magus. With Nigel's indulgence, we embarked on building experimental systems where the atoms of his habit could be unmounted from the frame and left for others to test.

This discourse with Nigel initiated the Ceramic Thanet project, which Nigel wholeheartedly embraced. He helped create experimental tools, like simple bags of dated pottery which could be laid out and handled, for the beginner to gain the experience of the pioneer under secure guidance. He organised a ceramic collection into sets that demonstrated his methods and extracted items that demonstrated principles that were part of his assumed knowledge. Even material he marked as having little value for storage have been repurposed into experimental learning materials. I came to understand his heuristics for testing the material properties of pottery (the fingernail click) and the Bayesian methodology that was used to generate dates from assemblages. Although he did not speak that way about them.

A little of the ritual of the magus remained though. For the grand layouts for Ceramic Thanet workshops, Nigel bought red velvet table covers, colour coded papers for laying out the sherds and labels in his distinctive cursive script. Palm trees and plants were requested for the rooms, to create just the right atmosphere to learn from the master. Formal ritualised presentation of knowledge, which we can repeat in his absence.

With Nigel's organised collection, we have the building blocks to enable us to verify that what we create from archaeological material is good, sound, solid, reliable, scientific fact. Here are the material facts, this is true. But, like someone whose whole life was dedicated to building a great organ, it has to put to use, we must now learn how to play his music on it.