

2. From the President

So, why do I do archaeology?

By Nigel Macpherson-Grant

Why do I not, at the age of 73, sit back, wiggle my toes and twiddle my thumbs? Well, I do a bit these days – I like my breathing spaces! There is, for me though, a pleasure in my drawing work and analysis – and when I get a new batch of pottery from someone, it's a bit like Christmas or birthdays! But – to go back to the opening question – the answer is I don't entirely know. I suppose it's a question of origination. In one sense I do know, in another I'm not so sure.

With the former – I know why explicitly. When I was doing my A-Level Literature, one of the books we had to study was 'A Pattern of Islands', written by a one-time District Commissioner of the Polynesian Gilbert and Ellis Islands in the Pacific. One short paragraph detailed briefly where they came from. Being young and into brown-skinned half naked ladies with long black flowing hair – I was off! Maybe I'm an incurable romantic – but then maybe the creative drive of mankind's journey, the sensual beauty of many of its artefacts does make it into a Romance – the missing bits and links, the near-total inability to be there with any particular moment or person that interests us, with them and their feelings, gods and goddesses and their own questions – becomes almost a mystery tale.

With the latter – there is a sense of something else. When she was young, in the 1920's, my grandmother, who was a fiery pint-sized redhead, was told by a fortune teller in Scotland – who was also red-haired – that my grandmother would have two sons, the second of whom would die but that that missing would be replaced by another child. The second did die but the seeing-lady's words stuck, so that, when I popped out of my own mother's womb-door, I was half expected. My parents divorced when I was six and both were never really there subsequently – and so she cared for me, because it was meant to be. At that time, she was the secretary for a concern called the New England Company – a seventeenth century charter-founded trust that cared for North American Indians in Canada – so she used to, when I was ill sometimes, invent going-to-sleep stories about Iroquois Indians. Excellent stuff, that she kept going, unwritten, out of her head, night after night. Inevitably American Indians always interested me, still do. Then, in my teens, reading a marvellous book about Aztec and Mayan architecture – with all their incredible hallucinogenic freezes. And going back a bit in time, nearer to home maybe, the unbelievable quality and skill in the making of some flint tools – early Egyptian knives and Early Bronze Age Danish daggers – flakes removed perfectly leaving long exquisitely parallel and fluted scars. And again, those huge Neolithic Danubian settlements in the Ukraine around 4000 BC, some with up to 10,000 people and their houses – ground floor and upper living space over with ladders up to – how almost modern can you get! The genuine beauty of Minoan art in Crete – and the sense of nature power in their shrine statuettes of bare-breasted priestesses in long dresses and arms up-raised holding snakes in their hands. Or on nearby Thera (Santorini), before its volcano blew – summer evenings, upstairs sitting by window spaces, a light sea breeze blowing in must have been sheer sensual bliss. The 'You must be joking' geometric exactness, size and effort in the making of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Inevitably, also, the almost mystical beauty of Chinese and Japanese ceramics, bronzes, lacquered bowls and porcelains, buildings – and throughout their long, long histories. And in a different way, the intelligence and desire for unity that accompanied the spread of Genghis Kahn's empire – its order and unique messenger service spread across vast tracts of land all beneath the steppe winds and under, at least for him, the blue heavens dictate. Much more recently, too, those Pacific people, with their light technically frail out-rigger double-hulled canoes and sail going into the unknown – what courage. Yet, not forgetting, that none of these things were achieved without trial and error, pain and difficulty – just as in our own, currently virus-imbued time, any advances made – and they will be – will not be bought free of loss. Sadly, few romances are free of that aspect.

When I was older, in one of my random moments away from archaeology, I read some of Carl Jung's work. I was struck particularly by his belief that a child's early formative-year dreams were important signposts and that they, and other later more notable – less day-to-day – dreams carried symbols and meanings stemming from the collective unconscious of the human journey, the, as he put it, numinous core of life. I had two early dreams, when I was very young, before I was six. The first was as I was recovering from some illness – and I awoke from a place filled with glowing yellow golden light, a sort of garden perhaps, no real shapes, just a sense of them – and maybe, maybe, in the centre a figure – but I cannot be sure. The second so-called dream was radically different – at night, fully awake and demonically, endlessly, laughing because all I could see was a massive sea-storm with a sailing ship being wrecked. The ship was seventeenth, probably eighteenth century, although at that age I did not know about sailing ships. Odd – where did they come from? I did not ask for them. Irrespective, both represented different polarities of my self – Horus and Set, Cain and Able, Alpha and Omegan aspects that a psychotherapist ultimately helped me to resolve and integrate. To varying degree those dark and light, rough or smooth, polarities are in all of us – they are naturally unavoidably there, and exist, hopefully to be understood by the self, in order to grow and mature.

Why am I saying all this? Partly because I've never forgotten the impact that first glowing dream had on me – it has always been there deep within the journey of my life – partly because I've never forgotten the implications of that second dream-vision. I think, fundamentally, this is what archaeology is all about though – recording that great, almost monumental, struggle between those two self-same polarities. But a struggle that has meant, means, we are still here, despite everything. It is difficult to remember that sometimes, especially when handling all those dusty old bits, those seemingly unimportant tiny fragments. Yes they can be grotty, but for me archaeological matter is more like living tissue, not dead – and, in scientific reality, that is so – all matter is alive even if it seems not – it is just energy vibrating at different rates. And as such artefacts are more like memories, signposts. Agreed, some sherds, like some memories, are less useful, less meaningful – but they all have their place. Although coinations like 'heritage', 'legacy' may seem a bit trite, jaded, bland even, especially the former these days – but in one sense we *do* handle the Ancestors' heirlooms, their artefactual inheritance as a reflection of a living connection, ultimately perhaps of much deeper truths.

The task it seems to me – as the very, very ancient Chinese oracle, the *I Ching*, the Book of Changes says (in its Hexagram 59 – which is technically about the dissolution of divisive social egotisms) is to keep the connection between God or, less contentiously perhaps, the origin of the Universe and mankind alive, to maintain the connection with the Ancestor's posterity. And it is a good one – their posterity, that is. It is not just the distinct benefit, the visual and psychological stimulation, of its art side, the tactile pleasure in holding something so very old, it is much more. As Alice Roberts said in her last episode of her very archaeological 'The Incredible Human Journey' – we are *all* part of the *same* human family. And that family has roots, deep ones.

So for me, metaphorically, archaeology is more like tree bark, oak tree skins with faces, the Green Man, the Norse Yggdrasil – the Tree of Life and destiny. So, although my path is working with the bi-product of the human tree's growth, I, we, as living beings, are its cells within and, inter-generationally, part of the conduit system that keeps that tree alive – the sap, the life-giving core of its life, the heart of the matter. As such one that deserves respect and proper treatment. Not one we should want to cut down lightly, I feel.