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Television Archaeology: Education or Entertainment?

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I am going to take a somewhat superficial look at archaeology and history on television, particularly archaeology. I will confine my remarks to the five terrestrial television channels, which still have the vast majority of the viewing audience. Despite the explosion of digital television and other channels, it is still BBC1 and 2, ITV, and Channels 4 and 5 where most people see most of their television archaeology and history. Archaeology and history both have a long record of appearance on television and their current popularity is nothing new. What is new, though, is the sheer number of such programmes, perhaps reflecting their popularity with television controllers, which is different from their popularity with the public. Here is my first gross generalisation, which I invite you to disagree with: I believe that history and archaeology have different things to offer television. History is superb at getting across narratives and stories to do with individual people and real people, and it is very good at focusing on specific events. Archaeology on television on the other hand I think has different strengths. It is much better at conveying the processes of discovery, interpretation and conservation, at getting across notions of heritage and the historic environment and what it means, and can show effectively the broad sweeps of human progress and human history.

Television treatment of both history and archaeology has not always been well received by archaeologists and historians. There are many good programmes but, of course, there are bad ones too. Some archaeologists and historians even dislike the good programmes, seeing them as evidence of the 'dumbing down' of their subject. In academia, we are taught to be objective, to avoid subjectivity and to allow critical re-evaluation of what we have written by our peers. There is also a preference within academia for the written word as the primary means of communicating and validating what we do in our research. Text is the dominant mode of discourse in academia and this imposes certain constraints on the construction of academic narratives. We are also trained to write in a particular way, using a register of English that is seldom used in everyday life (and I suspect that archaeologists are more guilty of this than historians). Television on the other hand is an intensely visual medium. It revels in the subjective. It makes great use of stories and narratives. Its visual nature demands a different type of discourse and construction of narrative from that which we get in academia.

I think it is noteworthy that the earliest archaeology on television had to fit into an entertainment format to be accepted. *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, which began in 1952, was a copy of an American TV show called *What in the World?*, and featured Glynn Daniel, Sir Mortimer Wheeler and some of the other key archaeologists of the day. It was a panel game where the panellists were given artefacts to identify and talk about, and it was immensely popular. Glynn Daniel was for many years a director on the board of Anglia Television and he was very influential in bringing archaeology to new audiences through television. [Sir Mortimer Wheeler](#) proved so popular as a performer on television that he was voted by viewers as TV Personality of the Year in 1954. *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* provided archaeology with its first media stars.

Furthermore, *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* also demonstrated one of the recurring themes of television archaeology: the emphasis on finds. It is the artefacts and the sites which for archaeology can yield good visual images around which narratives can be woven. At its best, this can lead to narratives, which inform as well as entertain. A series on built heritage like *One Foot in the Past* could do a great deal to raise awareness of the issues facing the historic environment in the modern world. The BBC's *Restoration* series has gone even further by exploring the human stories behind the buildings and raising money for their conservation. At its worst, however, the emphasis on what I call the 'product' of archaeology, the artefacts and the sites, can simply be the exploitation of nice images as a kind of non-demanding wallpaper for the living room. How many programmes and series on Ancient Egypt do we need and how many have actually advanced viewers' understanding of the complexities of this particular civilisation? What I think this reveals is that the narrative of the television producer almost certainly will not be the narrative that the archaeologist, or even historian, wants to convey.

Few people in the media have a detailed knowledge of what archaeology is. I work with media people within, for example, the BBC and Channel 4, and I find it shocking that I have to explain to media researchers who Tony Robinson is or what *Time Team* is because they have never even heard of it, let alone watched it. For some, what they do know about archaeology is fuelled by the simple stereotypes that we see in popular culture, like Indiana Jones and Lara Croft. It is no wonder, then, that the narratives often applied to archaeology revolve around words like ancient, secret, mystery, lost, civilisation, empire, detective. For the TV producer's dream to be realised, if possible there should be a murder, a mystery or a controversial reinterpretation of remains, all taking place in exotic locations with rich visual images. Thus we get Ancient Egypt, mummies, and someone proclaiming how all the experts so far have got it wrong.

Good quality archaeology on television is increasingly able to make use of one of its great strengths - its open and interesting processes of excavation, conservation, reconstruction and interpretation. People are genuinely interested in how we know what we think we know about the past. The first series to do this in a regular way was *Time Team*. This began in 1994 at a time when it was difficult to get any archaeology on television at all. The venerated series *Chronicle* was taken off air by the BBC in 1986 because it was seen as being too highbrow, too fusty, too academic and appealing only to an educated middle-class audience, all of which I would strongly contest, but that was how it was perceived. *Time Team* was accepted because, like *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral*, it was fitted into an entertainment format that was recognised by television controllers of the time. Its success has spawned many archaeology series since, including *Secrets of the Dead* and *Meet the Ancestors*.

The last full year for which I have audience figures for the five terrestrial channels is 2003. In that year, there were 185 hours of programmes on archaeology and ancient history and an additional 90 hours of programmes on heritage issues. Of course, history itself does better than that with 498 hours of programming in 2003. The archaeology, ancient history and heritage programmes were found in 41 new original series, 21 repeated series, 24 new single programmes and 5 repeat single programmes. I also looked at the history series in 2001 where there were 61 separate series, both new and repeats, 36 of which dealt with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I also found 37 single programmes, 31 of which dealt with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. (For TV history, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are rich in visual sources - photographs and moving images - which partly accounts for their dominance.)

Perhaps it is too easy to separate archaeology and history as disciplines. I suspect that the viewing public would classify all alike as 'programmes to do with the past'. What TV archaeology and history provide is a glimpse into a world that most people will never come into close contact with, that of the professional or academic archaeologist and historian. TV can help us to communicate with new audiences who are hungry for what we have to offer. If we do not offer them a rich diet of fact, process and interpretation - in other words, with strong narratives - then they will seek those narratives elsewhere and they will not be disappointed. People like Erich von Däniken, Graham Hancock and Robert Bauval can provide them with well presented televisual material, which presents a version of the past with which most academics would disagree. We should not be afraid, therefore, to embrace television, and I think that historians can learn something from TV archaeology about the evidence that the processes of discovery and interpretation are of also interest to the viewers. Equally, archaeologists can learn from historians that we should use our findings to create good narratives and engaging stories about the past and its people. Putting people back into the past is so important. In 1954, [Sir Mortimer Wheeler](#) wrote: "Year after year, individual after individual, learned society after learned

society, we are prosaically revealing and cataloguing our discoveries. Too often we dig up mere things, unrepentantly forgetful that our proper aim is to dig up people". (1) If you were an audience of archaeologists not historians that would be my main message: never mind the artefacts what about the people? I think that is one of the most important things that we can learn from history.

Michael Wood talked about a core audience of about three to four million viewers for history programmes on TV. A programme on Ancient Egypt might get about six million viewers, and a good, well publicised programme could get up to ten million. These figures have not changed in forty years; the core audience is the same and has always been there. Of course, television is not the only means whereby people get their impressions of the past. We could talk about popular magazines, historical novels, books and journals. But television is a very powerful medium of getting those messages across and if we are to use it properly then we have to accept the media modes of discourse - using narrative, subjectivity and audio-visuals. Television is in many ways the modern means of transmitting societies' accumulated stories and values to the younger generation. When we get the balance right between evidential fact and creative narrative, we can produce very powerful television, which is also powerful history and powerful archaeology. The BBC's *Pompeii - The Last Day* in 2003, which attracted nearly ten million viewers, was an excellent example of this. It taught people about the realities of the tragic events of that day in 79 AD in a very powerful way, which showed the evidence upon which the narrative was based. That was the key thing about that programme. It is also a superb resource for teachers to use.

For many, sitting in front of the television has taken the place of listening to stories told by our elders. The teaching of history in school within a limited space of time and for a limited number of years seldom has the emotive power of the combined viewing years of television, and what that does to bring the past to people and to life. For me, TV is the invisible teacher, ever present but seldom seen, an entertaining teacher but no less educative for being entertaining and a teacher that we should embrace as our partner in the task of education.

Notes

1. R. E. M. Mortimer, *Archaeology from the Earth* (Oxford, 1954), p. 18. [Back to \(1\)](#).

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