

Digital transformation?

written by Jeremy Huggett | 02/12/2014

The digitisation of archaeology over the past twenty years or so could be said to be an unprecedented transformation of the subject. The move from field notebooks (or quite literally in some cases the backs of envelopes, receipts, bus tickets and the like) to site databases, the move from desktop recording and hand logging to digital data capture in the field, the move from local databases to distributed databanks, the introduction and development of CAD, GIS, 3D modelling, and a host of innovations such as agent-based modelling, reflectance transformation imaging, structure from motion, and increasingly refined and 'intelligent' search tools ... all these would seem to support the idea of a digital transformation of the subject. The democratisation of technology appears to underline this – the fact that we have moved from a time when computers were in the hands of a few, usually academic, archaeologists to a situation in which everyone has a computer in their pocket, in their bag, and on their desk.

To put this differently, consider the thousands of mostly small-scale archaeological interventions undertaken across the UK and only available as grey literature. In 2001, Peter Fowler estimated that he was able to take account of less than five percent of the information gained over the past 20 years in attempting to write a work of archaeological synthesis (Fowler 2001, 607). Similarly, Richard Bradley's 2007 synthesis of British and Irish prehistory entailed four years of professorial research leave, plus the salary of a research assistant for three years (Bradley 2006, 10) in order to travel the country to seek out grey literature reports accumulated over 20 years. Now, however, there are almost 29,000 grey literature reports in the Archaeology Data Service digital library, and more are added each month through the OASIS project in England (from 2004) and Scotland (from 2007). Transformative indeed.

But are we over-egging the case for transformation? Is it really true to say that the subject has changed so radically as a consequence of digital technologies? Or is it an example of the enthusiasm for technology, the techno-boosterism, that often accompanies consideration of the recent past? Nicholas Carr, for instance, has suggested that if anything, progress has actually narrowed compared to the advances associated with electrification, medical technology, telecommunications, and the automobile from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Laying aside the techno-enthusiasm for a moment, would it be truer to claim that archaeological advances like open area excavation, consistent and considered recording methodologies, aerial photography, old-school resistivity meters that rely on hand-logging – even the trowel and dental pick rather than the pickaxe and shovel – are what have really transformed our subject? And regardless, where does that leave digital archaeology – as a transformative agency or a blind follower of fashion?

References

Bradley, R. 2006 'Bridging the two cultures – commercial archaeology and the study of prehistoric Britain', *The Antiquaries Journal* 86, 1-13.

Fowler, P. 2001 'Time for a last quick one?', *Antiquity* 75. 606-8.