



World archaeology

Archaeology: Monumental and Residential

Phil Perkins

Archaeology by its nature is democratic and enables you to study every aspect and all people in a society, regardless of their status. And there isn't always a glamorous story, because archaeology is no longer just a treasure hunt looking for great monuments. It is now a scientific and humanistic enquiry into the past.

Michael Smith

There is a number of Aztec urban sites that are known, but there tends to be a dichotomy. Sites either have monumental architecture that's been excavated, that survives today, but they have none of the residential areas available for archaeological study. So the Aztec Temple Major in the middle of Mexico City is an example of this.

Phil Perkins

Professor Michael Smith is based at the University of Arizona. He specialises in Aztec civilisation and is excavating at Calixtlahuaca in Mexico.

Michael Smith

There is very few surviving sites that combine monumental architecture and available residential areas, and Calixtlahuaca is one of those sites. The monumental archaeology, the study of the temples and the palace and all, was done in the 1930s by a Mexican archaeologist, José García Payón, which means I don't have to spend my time digging the big temples and palaces. That's already been done. So I can focus on digging houses, residential contexts, workshops, looking at the kinds of issues of daily life and households that I have focused on most of my career.

Phil Perkins

This is a case where archaeology is vital to the telling of the story, because the Aztec written documents do not record details of Aztec daily life. But the point where archaeology or pre-history ends and history begins is complex. In the modern world we have copious written documentation that could be used to compose our history, but even this would not tell the complete story because there is a limit to what people actually write down. Chris Scarre.

Chris Scarre

For instance, if you just think about Britain, you could ask when does pre-history in Britain stop? Obviously, the earliest written documentation referring to Britain is in the hands of Greek geographers. I don't think we would perhaps regard that as being the beginnings of the history of Britain. So you might then say, well, what about, say, the Roman conquest? And for instance I believe we still don't have a complete list even of the Roman governors of Britain, which shows you how little 'historical' it really is in one sense. And in the Anglo Saxon period, if you go on of course, then

literacy retreats for a while, and it's only perhaps in the late Anglo Saxon period that we get a wealth of documentation of a sort that we would call truly historical. And this story can be repeated around the world. We still are very much formed by the material circumstances in which we operate, not just by the texts we read and write.

Phil Perkins

This is what enables archaeology to investigate the cultural development of people in all parts of the world in remote times. Archaeology is a process of investigation, and new research is constantly revising the understanding of the past that we have. This can involve challenging received wisdom and re-excavating sites that provided the evidence for previous interpretations, such as those of Mortimer Wheeler in Southern Asia in the 1950s.

Robin Coningham

Wheeler always had a view for iconic sites and also concepts of basically trying to link sites in South Asia to classical sites within more of the European world.

Phil Perkins

Professor Robin Coningham, also based at Durham, re-investigated the site of Charsadda in north-east Pakistan.

Robin Coningham

The area we put the trench in proved to be extremely well placed, and the ceramic assemblage suggested that actually the origins of the site linked to the very late Calcolithic occupation of the area, right at the core, at the bottom of one of these very large later urban sites, it began to give us the idea that actually we were looking at some organic growth from much, much earlier. And this was reinforced when we got the radiocarbon dates back because they were dating to 1400 BC, which is the late Calcolithic, the beginning of the Iron Age itself. So suddenly we had a sequence which had been extended by something like eight hundred years.

Phil Perkins

A classic case of re-assessing a previously excavated site is Pompeii. It was buried when Mount Vesuvius erupted. And the assumption that the city was perfectly preserved beneath the ashes has become known as the Pompeii premise. Rick Jones and his team of archaeologists from Bradford University have investigated.

Rick Jones

The destruction does produce a quite different perception on what the place was like. However, when people talk about something called the Pompeii premise, they have a sort of notion that it's a bit like the place was suddenly deserted and you can just go in and blow off the dust and it was just like it was at the time. I think that mis-reads a number of things. One of them is the problem of what was the state of Pompeii at the time, because of the earlier earthquake. So although we have amazing glimpses of what people were like, especially the bodies that have been found, where people were carrying their jewellery or a little group of people together with their valuables with them, that sort of thing is a remarkable insight into what was happening, people scrambling into the roof to try and hide, that sort of thing. But in terms of what the city was like, as if you could just walk in, Pompeii isn't like that. The destruction itself is a big event that transforms what was there.

Phil Perkins

So, even a single dramatic event in the past doesn't provide a simple snapshot of the past. Pompeii is not a perfectly preserved Roman city. It's a Roman city that was transformed by earthquake, eruption and abandonment. And what archaeology finds is this process of transformation. Studying processes of change in human societies is central to archaeology, and each change is a piece in the story of human development. Chris Scarre.

Chris Scarre

How do you assess the rates of change? It's a rather difficult thing to pin down, but you could imagine it on a graph, where change is initially very slow and eventually becomes faster and faster and faster, until at the present rate of change we might consider as extremely rapid. And I think that would map almost exactly on to a graph of rising population. I think in fact there is a direct connection between the number of people in the world and the pace of change.