

# Conservation Archaeology & Museums

Occasional papers

Number 1 1980

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*Editor:* Suzanne Keene  
*General Editor:* Kate Foley

*Contributors in order*

Peter Addyman  
Christopher Gowing  
Janey Cronyn  
Suzanne Keene  
David Brown  
Graeme Lawson

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While it may well be feasible to use such techniques of stabilisation during the period of publication of the site and in some cases for the further retention of the archive, they obviously become unwieldy when objects are required for constant reference or display. To facilitate these activities or to preserve an object made from several different materials, the second approach to stabilisation must be followed. This approach considers artefacts individually and is directed to removing, and/or adding, substances to the archaeological material in order to bring it into equilibrium with the environment. While such techniques are generally available for excavated artefacts they are usually very expensive in time and materials consumed, and consequently stabilisation poses a dilemma; which sites or individual artefacts are to be stabilised simply by controlled storage and which merit the more costly procedure? Paradoxically however, the former method may in the long term be preferable since the techniques used for the second method have very different levels of success, are often difficult to put into practice and may have unwanted or unpredictable side effects on the material, jeopardising future analyses, stability and the possibility of using improved conservation techniques in the future.

Finally, further conservation may be practised on objects to render them suitable for display as it is envisaged at present. This may involve the painstaking removal of all obscuring deposits followed by techniques which attempt to make the object more understandable to the non-specialist. Since it is difficult to control adequately the environment of a display area, stabilisation of the object by other means is essential but it can be difficult to achieve.

The potential of conservation is wide-ranging and extensive and some degree of it can be realised at present. However no aspect can as yet be considered totally satisfactory and more research is essential. Certain stabilisation techniques may appear satisfactory in the short term, but study of the processes of deterioration and of long term alterations are urgently required, since more effective methods must be developed. Again some investigatory techniques in use at present interfere with stabilisation and analysis of objects in the future; other methods must be researched to replace them.

There are other factors too which limit the fulfilment of this potential, the most obvious being money in the form of posts, time and materials. Another is the lack of analytical facilities to which conservators have access, and yet another is the small number of trained conservators. Finally, the lack of liaison and dissemination of information between archaeologists, curators, finds specialists and conservators exacerbates the existing lack of definition for the role of conservation in archaeology and museums. Any exchange of views is therefore to be welcomed.

## DOCUMENTATION AND INFORMATION

### Suzanne Keene

The need for conservators, archaeologists and curators to regard artefacts as a valuable source of information has been a constant theme in these papers. However, we know that in practice the extraction of a perceptive synthesis from what may be many hundreds of corroded objects is no easy task, and the way we should set about producing an informative document from such sources is not immediately obvious. However, from this, it should be recognised that a collaborative approach including the conservator, finds specialist archaeologist and curator, might eventually enable us to improve on the kind of compartmented comments which so often find their way into print at present.

Work on finds, as on other sources of archaeological data, if it is to serve a useful purpose, requires firstly that observations and discoveries are scrupulously and clearly recorded; secondly, that the requirements for the work of each person are made clear to the other participants; thirdly, that information is arranged and passed on in such a way that it can be used by other members of the team and that its significance can be understood; and fourthly, that those receiving the information understand its limitations and make use of its potential.

To take as an example one part of the process, conservation; when I begin work on an artefact I would ideally like to know a great deal about its background. From the archaeologist I would like to know something of the structural interpretation of the context: was it from a pit, floor, work area? If there are organic remains in the corrosion, would these be of any interest? I would like to know the approximate date, or at least period, of the artefact; who will undertake the study of it, and what might I be able to contribute to this? (To this end, data sheets such as those provided by David Brown and Graeme Lawson would be a tremendous advance). Further, I need to know, what will the storage conditions be? Will the object be required for exhibition, or will it become part of the archive as an item to be studied?

To some extent it is part of the conservator's job to find these answers: to discover who are the relevant people and contact them, to keep up with published work, to make sure that people realize that the most effective conservation depends on knowing of the approaches and requirements of others.

For the conservator's own part, full and clear conservation records form the foundation of any subsequent technical investigation, and must be accessible to other workers. For this reason, there would seem, for example, to be a strong case for using the archaeological or museum accession number (which every object conserved should possess) to identify the record rather than imposing an unrelated 'laboratory number' which entails cross-referencing. But simply keeping records is equivalent to the compilation of site note books. It should be a matter of routine to accompany the artefact when it returns to its owner with a brief report on features which merit attention. Such reports could well include annotated drawings, which would be especially useful during drawing and cataloguing for publication.

It is conservators who for many excavations carry out the most detailed and comprehensive review of the finds after excavation, often before any other worker. Perhaps, therefore, they should play a more outward-looking part in the study of finds in both archaeology and museums. As well as drawing attention to aspects of individual finds, conservators might comment where possible on finds considered as groups - according to site or context, or according to functional class. Surface decoration and methods of fabrication, for instance, are often noticed during investigation and cleaning, and it would be a relatively easy step to review the records for certain classes of objects, and see if general observations or conclusions could be put forward. Another possibility which conservators could bear in mind is that programmes of research into aspects of artefacts - for instance, dyes, or the composition of alloys - could be suggested or commissioned. Modest but carefully designed projects could add a great deal more to the understanding of technology than do the one-off analyses which are often carried out at present, and it should not be impossible to find funds, and laboratories willing to carry out such work.

In their day-to-day work, the knowledge that something more than just a cleaned object was expected and would be used would encourage conservators to pay attention to what they observed, and to add to the pool of information which ought to be collected together about each class of object. It should perhaps become established practice to publish, with finds reports, a summary of the principal conservation techniques and approaches used: this might well affect the interpretation of finds descriptions, and the approach adopted by future workers.

I have considered the part which could be played by conservators in the extraction of maximum information from archaeological artefacts, in order to show how it would be possible to improve on many aspects of present practice in finds conservation. A similar review of the work of other participants in these studies would, I feel, be very likely to reveal comparable possibilities for improvement. Conservators are at the moment dependent upon their colleagues from the archaeological and curatorial professions to demonstrate by publication the value of artefacts as part of the evidence about the lives of the people whose material remains we excavate. The published excavation or finds reports which make full use of this evidence are few indeed. At present it requires an act of faith for the conservator to believe that all the painstaking and often expensive work of revealing and preserving finds is worthwhile. The treasure hunters in search of "goodies" could be condemned with more moral force if professionals were to show more convincingly, by the excellence of their publications and display, what is being lost.

### David Brown

Studying finds involves an initial question of recognition; there are those objects which we can recognize - we may not know what they are but at least they are familiar - and there are those objects which we cannot recognize. Happily this latter category decreases year by year, but it will always exist, and common sense and experience alone can advise on how to deal with such objects; is it a unique treasure or a unique bit of rubbish?

The second sorting process involves deciding whether or not the object is one which conservation is going to be able to tell us something about. A sherd of pottery, a piece of glass, a smooth bone tool - these are objects which we would not normally expect to learn more about from 'conservation', and it is unlikely that they would even be sent to the laboratory. Of course the expertise and the tools of the conservator may well be able to help in the study of this sort of object, but that is not the aspect of conservation which concerns us most here.

But there are hundreds of objects about which the conservator will be able to tell us something: metal objects which, though intact themselves, preserve in their corrosion evidence of other objects now vanished; objects of two materials, two metals, and especially objects of a composite sort involving metals and organic materials one of which has partly rotted away. Perhaps it is these composite objects which we may expect to yield most to conservation. Artefacts such as these are all of course objects which by their very nature will require conservation, and will go to the laboratory.

What is perhaps not so obvious is that finds-people must provide the questions if they are to expect conservators to provide answers. It's my experience - and I am sure I am not alone - that information which I had hoped to get out of conservation has sometimes not been forthcoming because I had not set out the questions I wanted answered. How can it be otherwise? Only if I share the problem with the conservator so that he or she knows what to look for can I expect the help I need in solving it.

One way of achieving this is for the object to be examined first by the finds expert, who could then pass it on to the conservator with notes and sketches and a batch of questions. This is a good system because the exercise of writing things down means that details get recorded rather than forgotten, and, in practice, more is noticed than is otherwise the case; but it takes a long time - and it is limited by the interest and knowledge of the person making the comments. All of us have our blind spots!

I should like to see developed a series of data-sheets for common objects - sheets which set out concisely what is known about particular types of objects, what problems are uppermost in people's mind, and what the conservation of (... the example which you have in your laboratory today ...) might be able to answer.

I have set out as an example a data-sheet on Anglo-Saxon shields. There are hundreds of these in museums around the country, and every Anglo-Saxon cemetery excavation is going to produce more; yet, how many people