

## The role of the 'junior' in environmental archaeology: a personal view

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### Summary

From the author's standpoint as someone employed within archaeology to co-ordinate on-site 'environmental' work and undertake specialist investigations of one class of biological remains, the advantages and disadvantages of such a position are discussed.

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'The very great need for scientists coming into archaeology to work under the guidance of experienced people, and to have access to good facilities and reference materials from the beginning is best satisfied by the establishment of junior posts in association with existing centres. This is much to be preferred to the establishment of isolated junior scientific posts associated with archaeological organizations where there is no opportunity for training and supervision. However admirable may be the efforts of people in such positions to train themselves and to build up their laboratory facilities and reference collections, it is wasteful of resources, and carries a high risk that results will be published before adequate standards have been reached.' (Thomas 1983, 50)

The aim of this short discussion is to present a personal view of the situation regarding the employment of the junior 'environmentalist' in archaeology, to assess the advantages and disadvantages of setting up posts within the existing archaeological units, and to suggest how the needs of the specialist can be met within an archaeological framework. The term 'junior' is used here to refer to archaeologists and scientists who have undergone a basic training in environmental archaeology, but have not had extensive practical experience.

To explain the personal bias in the paper, at the time of writing I am employed as a Junior Researcher in the Archaeological Unit for North-East England, to act as both the 'on-site' environmentalist and a specialist in one of the aspects of the biological remains recovered from our excavations (fish bones). The post is therefore at least in part of the type that the Archaeological Science Committee of the CBA (Thomas 1983, above) dismissed, so I felt that there was a need to put forward a personal view of the value of the 'in-Unit' environmentalist.

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To turn firstly to the advantages of the position: the linking in a single post of the on-site environmentalist with the worker on one of the specialist areas has one obvious advantage, which is that the specialist in at least one area of study has seen the excavations and been involved in them to a much greater degree than any laboratory-based specialist could be. This can enable sampling on-site to be geared much more closely to answer particular research questions formulated by the specialist, some of which may only be generated as a result of seeing the excavation in progress and may therefore be of a much more interdisciplinary nature than is often the case when 'off-site' specialists formulate questions in isolation from the excavation. By working closely with the post-excavation team the on-site/in-Unit environmentalist can also speed up the progress of specialist report writing by being on-hand to answer queries and sending the relevant documentation to the other environmental specialists involved in the project. Crucially, too, the environmentalist can assess the results of the specialist reports as they arrive and take a wider view of the conclusions, enabling a synthesis of the results of the environmental analyses to be presented.

The appointment of an on-site environmentalist should also lead to a greater amount of the 'technical' work associated with sampling and processing samples being undertaken on-site, by the excavation team under supervision, resulting in time-saving within the laboratory as much 'ready-processed' material can be sent. By allowing the on-site environmentalist an important role in the post-excavation programme, it is also possible to attract better qualified applicants than would have applied for a purely excavational post.

So much for the advantages of the creation of junior posts within archaeological establishments. Now for the problems. The major disadvantage, as Thomas has pointed out, is that a newly-qualified environmentalist (and long-trained environmentalists, for that matter) requires easy access to a comprehensive body of reference material, which few, if any, archaeological units can provide. The specialist also requires, to a greater or lesser degree depending on the specialism concerned, access to scientific equipment, much of which is beyond the pocket of archaeological establishments. While individual workers will, of necessity, build up their own reference collections, the time and money needed to build up a comprehensive collection would not be tolerated by most funding bodies, and not suprisingly so!

The concept of an individual environmentalist creating a laboratory is therefore an unrealistic aim, and the time and money would be much better spent in already established laboratories manned by a number of specialists. The other very valid point made by the Archaeological Science Committee (see quotation from Thomas (1983), above) is that junior researchers, in particular, need easy access to other workers in their field to enable constructive discourse and criticism to take place resulting (it is hoped) in improvements in standards of work. There is indeed a danger of publishing work before adequate standards of identification and interpretation skills have been reached, and this applies no less to the contract worker, established at home, than to the junior researcher in isolation within an archaeological establishment.

So what is the best way forward? If junior workers are restricted to working within established laboratories under careful supervision, who is going to take on co-ordinating the job of the on-site environmentalist? If on-site environmentalists are precluded from any of the post-excavation work, apart from the 'technician' tasks they will rapidly become disenchanted with the subject, and will find advancement difficult without a specialisation in their pockets. Yet on-site environmentalists must have a training in

environmental archaeology in order to understand sampling requirements, and the needs of specialists. In my view the best way forward is to employ much greater flexibility within junior posts, to enable the environmental archaeologist to work both on-site, and at the post-excavation stage within an established laboratory to pursue a specialization, but with frequent visits back to the archaeological establishment to keep up to date on the progress of the archaeological interpretations. The obvious problem is, of course, the non-availability of established laboratories in some regions. While the ideal solution would be the creation of more established laboratories, in the present financial climate this seems a little unlikely! There are, however, Universities, Polytechnics and Colleges accessible from most areas of the U.K., where ties with scientific laboratories may be possible. Speaking as one based in a Unit within a University it is suprising how much help is available outside the Archaeology Department, once communications are established, but perhaps communication should be the first objective for, without a concerted effort on this front, it is suprising how little information passes between university departments, let alone between departments and bodies outside the academic establishment.

#### Reference

Thomas, C. (ed.) (1983). Research Objectives in British Archaeology. London: Council for British Archaeology.