Lithic Studies: Looking Backwards - Looking Forwards.

The Lithic Studies Society Anniversary Conference
St Hilda's College, Oxford, 2-4 April 1993

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A capacity audience of some 100 people - about a quarter of whom were speakers! - attended the Society's second residential conference (the previous one was in Cardiff in 1988). Billed as an anniversary conference, few people were aware that the anniversary being celebrated was that of the Society's first ten years of existence; not surprisingly, since the Society was actually founded in 1979 (or in 1978 if you count the Lithic Study Group from which it sprang).

The delay was not just due to habitual lack of maths expertise among lithicists, nor to the laid-back attitude which has been an enduring quality of the Society's successive committees. Only at a very late stage was it decided to change the original concept of an anniversary dinner into a meeting, then came the idea of a full weekend conference, then the possibility of an accompanying exhibition on lithic illustration, then the problem of who on earth would undertake the organization of the whole thing. Fortunately Nick Ashton, Andrew David, and Alison Roberts rose personally to the occasion, and the result of this extended gestation period was a hugely successful conference.

The papers presented were grouped into five themes: dating and scientific techniques; raw materials and petrology; resource management; functional analysis and technology; and typology. There was something here for anyone even remotely interested in lithic studies: from the earliest Palaeolithic industries of the Thames Valley and Sussex to 19th-century gunflint manufacture at Monti Lessini in Italy; from nitrogen profiling to museum curation; and from a personal lithic scatters to the very personal 'iceman'. It was a crowded programme, and in between papers there was only just time to browse/buy at David Brown's excellent Oxbow bookstall and to stare in admiration at Patrick Cave-Browne's impromptu demonstrations of how-to-make-a-fire-with-stones and how-to-make-a-perforated-stone-object.

I do not propose to list or review the papers themselves, since the conference proceedings will soon be published as what promises to be a most stimulating Occasional Paper of the Society. Rather I will restrict myself to random reminiscence of a conference which was most noteworthy simply for being so very enjoyable.

There was a palpable sense of enthusiasm which was quite infectious, even for those with the most jaded of lithic palates. I attribute this not just to the quite extraordinarily good beer dispensed at the bar (which despite selling out managed to make a loss due to a mistake in pricing - see what I mean about numeracy!), but to a cross-generational conviction that doing lithic studies is both worthwhile and pleasurable. As John Wymer put it in his introductory remarks, lithic studies are after all absolutely central to the whole history of archaeology and to the recognition of the prehistoric human past. The feeling that we labour within an honourable tradition was helped by sitting listening to papers surrounded by an exhibition of magnificent illustrations including some examples venerable enough to suggest it could easily have been a centenary conference.

This is not to claim that lithic studies are any kind of Elysian Fields of archaeological endeavour. Between the generations and between the specialism (and within the specialisms) there are major disagreements, but my perception is that these are healthy ones, conducted for the most part with forbearance, even when it comes to the Clactonian questions or to the future of microwear studies. For once at an archaeological conference I did not detect any knives out - apart from those in Linda Hurcombe's slides! Andy Brown's suggestion that the Society change its name to SPALS - the Society for the Promotion of All Lithic Studies - was not taken seriously but his message was taken to heart.

Perhaps the ambience of St Hilda's by the Cherwell in spring made everything rose-tinted, or perhaps, like the Society, I'm just getting old, but I was enormously encouraged by this conference and came away convinced that the Society does have a valid part to play on the British archaeological stage, and, even more positively, that there is a growing pool of talented individuals who feel the same. Roll on the next anniversary!

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