4 Talking with a Legend

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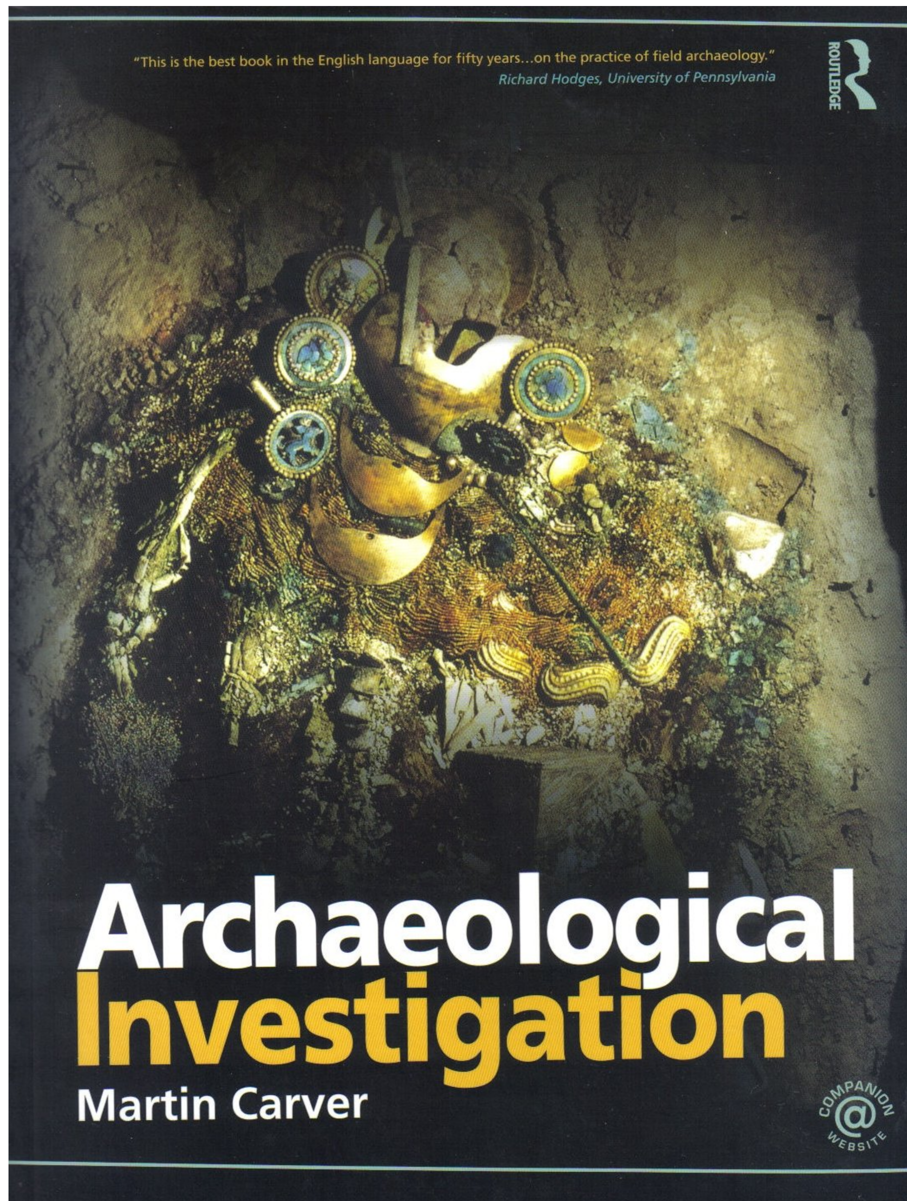
An interview with Professor Martin Carver, conducted by Mark Simpson- 17/02/10

If you ask an archaeologist, or even an archaeology student, to name a legend of the profession, you may well get a number of different answers. Gordon Childe, Graham Clarke, C.J. Thomsen, Colin Renfrew, even Indiana Jones are likely to be among the names that come up. But ask the same question in the York archaeological community and one name will keep occuring: Emeritus Professor Martin Carver.

Former army officer, ten years as head of department at York, editor of Antiquity, excavator at Sutton Hoo (and many other sites around the world), Professor Carver is much respected and loved by both current and former students and staff of the Department. He has a new book, *Archaeological Investigation* (Figure 1), available and I was able to interview him at the launch, held recently at King's Manor...



Martin Carver's new book. Reproduced by kind permission of Martin Carver.

Mark Simpson – We are here today for the launch of your new book, *Archaeological Investigation.* Could you tell me a little about the book please?

Martin Carver – It's a book for first years – pretty much based on the course at York I've given since 1987 and it's been developing through that time, thanks to our first years. Every year they've brought new questions and new ideas, which has helped enormously. I was originally commissioned to write a book on Field Archaeology for Thames and Hudson, a bit like another Renfrew and Bahn book, with an American co-author. I spent fourteen years on it and the book grew to 450,000 words and they said 'We can't publish this!' So I said well, fine, and I started again and I split it into two. The book that has come

out today, thanks to Routledge, is meant for undergraduates, school leavers and so on, and its objective is to bring together the academy, that's the people who do research in universities, and the profession, that's the people who do research using developer's money. All my life I've felt that these two groups should be working together, and have a single objective and a single mission. Only a few of our students who leave university become lecturers, but very many of them do go and work in the profession. So what I'm hoping to provide is something that will become an old friend, when you're working in the trenches, looking for sections to draw for the developers. Something to tell you that you're part of a much bigger operation. We're all in it together, we're all trying to find out about the past, we're not just trying to hold down a job.

The first three chapters give you the principles, next comes a section on being in the field, then on how to write up reports and finally on how to design projects. So it's the sort of book you could grow up with, the first bit is very much what we teach in university, then you go into the field and find out what it's really like, then the third bit is about when you get more responsibility: you're writing up and reporting on what you find. But I think the last bit, project design, for me, is the key skill and it's changing archaeology. We're becoming more like architects, and less like building labourers, that's what project design is doing.

Mark Simpson – At the moment, First year students at York are grappling with archaeological theory. Can you tell us what your theoretical position is?

Martin Carver – I'm very interested in theory, and regard it as a big toolbox, with lots of ideas in it. And I'm very impressed with how all those ideas can remain valid. The trouble with theory is that there is a lot of kudos attached to it. So everyone is looking for the 'latest theory' on the understanding that it might supplant the one before. But my feeling is that a lot of people out there are still interested in getting the cultural sequence right, others are still interested in studying process, while others are more interested in studying symbolism. So although it is quite hard to be all those things, and be reflexive on top of that, you have to try. It's like you can't really be a novelist with only one plot, or a musician who writes for only one instrument.

I do feel that sometimes theory gets a bit narrow, because it wants to 'score points' and be the theory that is driving archaeology at the moment; whereas actually it's a game we all play and it's all to do with interpretation, to do with deciding what you've got and what it means. In the field I know everyone wants to separate data from interpretation. Before Ian Hodder made it, quite rightly, a main part of archaeology to merge observation and interpretation, we were long doing this in my type of field archaeology, the sort you'll find in the book. Readers will notice that it doesn't just go down the old line of single context recording and matrixes; those will be seen as useful tools, rather than gospel. I take the view that on site you are always interpreting, recording your observations and recording your interpretations and one builds the other. Say you take a group of people who are digging and talking about what is happening on the dig, either afterwards at the pub or in a break. You soon get the feeling that there is always a consensus at a certain level. Everyone will agree that they're in Yorkshire, and agrees that this is some kind of Roman building, but they may not agree on what sort of building it is. The interpretations will then rise to higher levels. 'It's a villa', then at a higher level, 'it's a high status villa'. Then, 'it belonged to Carausius'. Then at a higher level still, 'this is a tower in the middle', followed by 'in the tower is a hook where Carausius hangs his hat'.

For me, interpretation is this tower of invention, getting more and more lofty, and losing more people the higher it goes, but if you don't like where you are, you just go back down to the previous level you did believe in.

It's not going to be black and white, when you do archaeology. Sometimes as a first year you think, 'I don't think much of this as a science, there seem to be no facts in it!' But that's like life. That's what I think about theory, I love it, but for me it is at the service of archaeological investigation, not the other way around.

Mark Simpson – What would you say is the most significant find you have made in your archaeological career?

Martin Carver – Well, that's a hard question because it mixes up what is significant to other people with what is significant to me. What's significant to me was taking the brick floor off the bottom of the old theatre in Durham in 1974 and smelling this incredible smell of vivianite, preserved wood and debris, and underneath this, just literally inches under the floor, finding a preserved 10th century house, alongside the street, at the very beginning of the life of Durham. Every day we were pulling out pieces of textile and silver birch posts, with the bark still on. Amazing. That gave me such a thrill, because it was very unexpected as well.

I suppose if I had to step aside and say what is the most significant thing for other people, or what it ought to be, it was finding the Pictish monastery at Portmahomack, because there weren't any Pictish monasteries before we found that one. In fact a lot of people didn't think there were any Pictish churches. I think that scored quite a hit. We were quite surprised because we thought we were going to dig a settlement. In a way it was quite annoying! But pretty good for people studying that period.

Mark Simpson – Do you have any projects currently underway?

Martin Carver – My main job is editing Antiquity, which is pretty much full time – but as for projects, I've now written up all my own stuff, but still love writing. The last project to go was Stafford, which has just been completed and is going to press this month – it should come out at the end of this year, so then my backlog is finished. What I've started to do as my retired job is to write up other people's excavations, where they've died or got no time. I've just got the go-ahead to do Pitcarmick, a beautiful site in Perthshire dug by Jane Downes and John Barrett. It's got the only convincing Pictish houses on the mainland, but it also has Bronze Age and Iron Age buildings, a really nice landscape sequence.

Why would I do that? Well, it's a good question. I did think of going to Sicily and doing a big excavation there, I had opportunities in Italy, and in France, I could have dug in Scandinavia, and Yorkshire as well. And it still may happen, but for me it can only happen if there's enough money to do it professionally. I don't want to be a sad retired person, with a spade, digging an untidy hole somewhere. So I work very closely with FAS (Field Archaeology Specialists) Heritage here in York, the second field company I've founded, and I'm also going to work again with my first company Birmingham Archaeology at Stratford Upon Avon, where they are doing a project at Shakespeare's New Place.

At this stage of life I want to leave the digging to young people, who have better eyes and are happy to fill a barrow all day long, all the things I used to

do. Now I like to do what I'm better at than them: writing up, or designing new projects.

Mark Simpson – If you were offered a trip in a time machine, which historical period would you visit?

Martin Carver – Oh, the 7th Century! I've spent most of my life mentally in the 7th century, and I'll tell you why. In northern Europe, and other places too like north Africa, where I've worked, it was a period of political freedom, so there was no overarching authority, trying to make people act and think exclusively in one way. For that reason it liberated the ideas that are present inside people and which can come out they're not all dragooned into all doing the same thing. If you take a piece of rough ground which is dominated by bracken and turf, if you mow that off and leave it, in the spring a thousand flowers come up, all sorts of things come up, because they are no longer inhibited by the bracken. And that's what happened in the 7th Century, in Europe and Africa.

The big new ideas, Islam and also Christianity, were certainly on the horizon, but before they got there, there was a chance for people to express themselves freely. And that's why this period has such an amazing diversity of monuments. Archaeologists and art historians used to translate this as 'oh dear, they didn't quite know what they were doing, they were waiting for the Christians to come and show them how to do it'. But my own researches suggest that all these people who lived in England, Scotland and Ireland, Scandinavia, the Rhineland and so on, they were receiving these new ideas and then making them into special statements of their own. That's where the special monuments come from. So you've got this immense European anthology of ideas which later got lost in the undergrowth. You can find them popping up from time to time, as heresies or little rebellions, other ways of living, other ways of thinking about the next world. The 7th Century is the last time we can see them all clearly.

Professor Carver, thank you for your time.