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Deposited on: 17 October 2014
The plenary session

JOHN BARBER with ALISON SHERIDAN

In September 2005, the 11th International Conference of the Wetland Archaeology Research Programme was held under the auspices of the Scottish Wetland Archaeology Project in Edinburgh. Attended by well over 200 scholars from Europe, Australia, Japan, New Zealand, Canada and the USA, it opened with a plenary session of review papers on the general theme of wetland landscapes, and progressed in three parallel sessions themed on lacustrine, alluvial and peatland sites. This organization is reflected in the arrangement of these proceedings.

The plenary session began with a consideration by Adrian Phillips of three approaches to landscape enshrined in the World Heritage Convention, the IUCN Protected Landscapes and the European Landscape Convention. All three provide insight into the concept of cultural landscapes; landscapes formed by the interaction of people and place over time. The survival of wetland archaeological sites can be, and often is, influenced by events at some distance from their immediate location, eg drainage of wetland miles from a raised bog can spell the end of that bog and its archaeological contents. We, the archaeological profession, have a vested interest in and should support and campaign for legislation or guidance that, operating at the level of landscape units, could contribute to the survival of our most important sites.

Conor McDermott’s paper on the wetland work undertaken by the Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit emphasizes just how difficult it is to identify and make value assessments on archaeology in peatlands. For those of us living in lands in which extensive mechanized stripping of peatland is not the norm the problems are even more severe. However, his recommendations of future priorities are extremely helpful and, given that IAWU recorded over 3,500 wetland sites in just 10 of Ireland’s 32 counties, his recommendations are well founded.

Richard Brunning’s paper raises some very pertinent questions about the value of monitoring waterlogged sites in England and Wales in the absence of clear policies (or the resources to put them into effect) for dealing with the sites being monitored. In the absence of the means or the will to intervene and preserve or excavate threatened sites of signal importance, archaeological monitoring seems, to this writer, fatuous at best. It is merely activity masquerading as action and a wholly inadequate response to endangered archaeological sites of very high cultural value.

Major infrastructural developments in Scania afforded opportunities for the investigation of wetland sites on a landscape scale. It also revealed dryland sites and facilitated a better understanding of their interrelationships. Of course, sites discovered in this way cannot be saved. Thus, although a financial burden for the development, it is wholly appropriate that the necessary works are fully prosecuted, at the expense of the development.

John Barber must admit to a bias in commenting on the report by Robert van Heerigen and Liesbeth Theunissen. He lived for a short period in the Netherlands as a younger man and conceived, while there, a deep and abiding respect and affection for Netherlanders. Their willingness to make difficult decisions and to take logical and effective remedial action was an inspiration. Read Heerigen and Theunissen and be inspired! The professionalism of their approach and their execution of a technically complex programme together with their clear exposition of the results (and enviable publication record) sets a standard for which the rest of Europe, indeed the rest of the world, should strive.

Finally, we were reminded by Aidan O’Sullivan and Robert Van de Noort that landscapes, as opposed to landforms, are structures of the mind. They presented an interesting case for considering the sense of time experienced by the makes and users of the structures and artefacts we find in waterlogged deposits. High levels of precision are available from radiocarbon and dendrochronological dating of wetland materials. These invite and facilitate consideration of much fuller site and artefact biographies that focus on the
social and cultural meanings of these objects over the whole of their existences.

In a related presentation, Van de Noort and O’Sullivan argue for a revision of our thinking on the landscape dimensions of wetlands. Confirming that the term ‘wetland’ is of recent birth, they argue that its use in the interpretation of wetland archaeology may prove unhelpful. Further, noting the differences of perception between those within and those outwith wetlands, they emphasize the enculturation of wetlands, the significance of boundaries and the consideration of landscapes as ‘taskscapes’, networks of places in which humans undertook tasks.

These considerations of time and space are presented in a post-processual exercise which is, by implication, impossible in a processual framework. However, their own observations actually suggest that the differences between processual and post-processual approaches are here more apparent than real. Aidan and Robert found their thesis in some part on a rehearsal of Crone’s account of the use-history of the lacustrine crannog site at Buiston. However, Crone wrote her account of Buiston innocent of any consideration of post-processual site narrative (pers comm). Is it therefore the abundance of evidence, excellence of preservation and high chronological resolution of the wetland sites that allow us to approach the hearts and minds of our ancestors so much more closely than we can do with dryland sites? If this is the case, we may need to conclude that the lack of impact of wetland results on the interpretational models applied to dryland sites probably cannot be remedied. The exceptionally high information-content of wetland sites derives from the high volume of recoverable detail on wetland sites which is available at extremely high levels of stratigraphic and chronological resolution, levels that dryland sites can only rarely emulate.

Perhaps then we have to accept that wetland archaeology is a theatre of archaeology in its own right, neither reliant on dryland archaeology nor validated by the provision of insights to dryland studies. Certainly, with the publication of *Rethinking Wetland Archaeology* by Van de Noort and O’Sullivan (2006), the dawning of a theoretical framework for wetland archaeology is upon us. Wetland studies ought to inform and be informed by dryland archaeology but we need to drive wetland studies forward in a positive and confident manner and not await the universal acknowledgement of the debts, real or imagined, owed by one to the other. The conference in Edinburgh certainly convinced these writers that wetland archaeology is well along the track to establishing itself as a major sub-species of that wonderful animal, Archaeology. SWAP hopes that when you have had the chance to read these papers you may also agree.