'Archaeoonist Man'

BILL TIDY*

I assume that everyone is agreed that the earliest forms of human communication were by grunts and gesticulation and, in amicable circumstances, these methods must have been reasonably adequate. If, however, the fellow conversationalists were hostile and within club- and rock-throwing range, chances are that the meeting would end in injury, humiliating flight or both.

I'm not qualified to carbon-date the arrive of *Homo Prudentis* but let's guess at 250,000 years ago when the first man to appreciate the power and safety of the long-range insult appeared on the scene. This genius, almost certainly nursing a fractured skull, reasoned in a flash of pain that scratching an image on a flat surface and retiring out of rock shot was by far the safest way to insult an enemy who was bow-legged and ugly even by Neanderthal standards. Artistically, once the adrenalin had settled, it was a logical progression in his spare time to move on to more mundane subjects. Gazelles, bison and cave bears were fun, but if necessity is the mother of invention I believe that 'Rocktoons' pre-dated speech and all other forms of art, for logic tells us that a sore thumb and forefinger from scraping a flint on a cave wall is infinitely preferable to a blinding headache.

Half of any professional body is made up of critics and archaeology is packed more than most callings with people who delight in exploding crackpot theories. They will pounce on me and ask why, if so many of these Mr Bean-like caricatures were on show in every cave chain in the world, none have been found? The obvious answer to this query is another question! If you are an ugly, bow-legged archaeologist and you came across a group of colleagues clustered around a vulgar drawing and tittering at its unmistakable, unflattering resemblance to you, what would you do? Destroy it, of course, but here's the fiendish ingenuity of the long-range insult! You cannot fire back a reprisal picture because *a* the identity of the perpetrator is unknown and *b* even if you do recognize it as Professor Challenger's handiwork, you can't draw! Q.E.D.! How sad that one of mankind's major steps in contumely was successful because of its absence!

The theory is only revealed to the world because I feel an affinity with *Homo Prudentis*. My ability to draw is innate, a millimetre away from the Savant Syndrome, and there are millions like me. Inborn talent must come from a time when Man had nothing but instincts to lean on and it's comforting to know in the computer age that unconscious impulses from the brain can beat a machine which must work within logical parameters. Even when serendipity is introduced into software, it still lacks the eccentricity of a creative mind, so drawing to amuse still looks reasonably safe.

This is all a roundabout way of introducing my interest in archaeology, which is Hollywood-inspired. I wonder how many people were first hooked by the epics of de Mille and then by mummies? Pots, mosaics and pyramids were OK, but the High Priest brought back to life by a modern follower of the Old Religion had me by the throat! Never mind if his tongue had been ripped out for daring to buss Pharaoh's daughter. Who needs a tongue if the only reason to revive him was so that he could tear to pieces the archaeologist who had violated his tomb? It was that delicious threat and the exquisite wall painting concealing deadly spear traps, patiently waiting for the poor devil who stepped on the wrong floor stone, that did the trick for me. 'To him who disturbs the sleep of the Pharaoh, let death come on swift and silent wings' was probably written by a Hungarian movie director, but to me, who remembered hearing a trumpet from Tutankhamen's tomb played on the BBC Home Service in the 1940s, it was a little perplexing. If Hollywood archaeologists had such an exciting and dangerous time, why was it that the public perception of British archaeology was one of desiccated academics with private means, sometimes titled, and never given to going down to the pub or Chelsea football ground? I was confused be-

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cause the early television stars Glyn Daniel and Sir Mortimer Wheeler never came across as stuffy and, years later, correspondence with Henry Cleere confirmed my suspicions. Most archaeologists lived as enthusiastically in the present as they did in the past! They did, however, have one major failing. This was a belated Victorian hangover of which they were aware subliminally but not visibly concerned — the blinding hypocrisy of their predecessors when dealing with the moral problem of deciding what should or should not be displayed to the public!

What Victorian morals had to do with totally alien cultural and religious climates of the past, when archaeology was supposed to be the study of human antiquities, baffled me. It didn't baffle them, and academic opinion was definite. Huge tracts of discovery must be kept away from the great unwashed because of their sensitivity. The rude and bawdy, comically disgusting and brutally explicit was available to everyone, from Jack the Ripper to the Prince of Wales, but not at the British Museum! That's not strictly correct, because certain 'objects', so it is alleged, of a 'particular nature' were of interest to academics of 'refined' tastes (note the ponderous quotes) and kept hidden away in legendary locked cupboards or private collections. From a falling-over-backwards position, I suppose such a sanctimonious attitude might be understood if not forgiven, but what infuriated me was that, in some cases, the relics were destroyed! Pots, ornaments, statues, pictures, deliberately smashed for posterity!

Archaeology had always intrigued me but now it was irresistible, and by great good luck I met up with Paul Bahn. He was the expert who allowed me into the magic circle. Yes, archaeologists, like any other professional body, did joke amongst themselves about Flinders Petrie wearing flesh-coloured tights to frighten away the lady tourists who were clogging up his excavations, but seldom mentioned such things to outsiders. It was 'in-house' stuff, and when I mentioned the Tomb Painter's revenge (bottom of far wall behind the chariot 'I've got eleven kids, work my tripes out, she never lets up! I hope Pharaoh's boat sails across the sky and sinks!') Bahn said it might possibly be true. He added that he and his colleagues knew of many such examples of the spirit and failings of our ancestors and *Disgraceful archaeology* was born — what THEY didn't want 'you to know about Mankind' was a collection of the tales, and we reasoned that if it was suppressed by the Victorians there was a strong possibility that at best it would be funny, and at worst, interesting. The call went out on the net for titbits and the response left us delighted. The book, a small thing, was not quite a bestseller, but sheer schoolboy fun to complete. We found that the favourite targets for Victorian censorship were firstly (no bets accepted on this one), sexual activity of a varied and inventive type; closely followed by assassination of the Great in totally embarrassing circumstances; and, coming up on the rails, some of Aesop's most lurid fables. The rest was made up of graffiti, personal and public habits, entertainment and quack medicine, in other words, everything you come across walking along the High Street today. The extent of Victorian Humbug wasn't all bad news and we were pleased to discover that what made the ancients laugh had the same effect on us! There are as many Humbuggers walking the same street presently as there were in Luxor, Athens and Rome, so as I repeat *ad nauseam*, we haven't changed much and that makes life a little easier for me.



'I didn't know hanging gardens were copyright!'

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Currently, a large part of my output is based on the comings and goings of ancient civilizations and I derive as much fun from the invention of unlikely scenarios as Graham Hancock does. For both of us, the lure is in the past, the fascinating mix of fact and myth, and interestingly, this is where the professional and I part company. The archaeologist works to separate truth from legend while I'm thinking laterally of ways to keep them nicely tangled. The more Trojan Horses, Golden Fleeces and Minotaurs I can cram into the Colosseum the better, and that's without stealing anything from that great standby, the Old Testament. The one fly in my ointment is that Humbug has changed its name to Political Correctness and, while I'm not aware of PC's impact on archaeological practice, reports come in from the Mad World that certain paintings and statues cause grave offence because they have sprouted uncovered breasts and genitals! Disgraceful! Thank God, no work of mine featuring the aforementioned accessories has caught the attention of the witchfinders, but I must tread carefully! The challenge of the Herm stands distantly in my path! I suppose a post-hammer attack Herm would get by as a cop-out but then it wouldn't be a Herm, would it? For me that sums up the stupidity of PC. But enough politics! Back to work!

How do we construct a cartoon from an Egyptian and Greek setting? Clothing and buildings are no real problem, because we all know roughly what they look like, but even at a shallow level, it is apparent that all obvious gags have been done. The stylized line of Egyptians with the thumb on the wrong side of one hand and all facing the same direction with a caption 'Eyes right!' probably led the way, so now thought is involved. This is the moment that the artist realizes that he or she has walked into a minefield, because when drawing for a readership which knows more about the subject than the cartoonist, some homework must be done! It is at this time that what was no more than a liking for archaeology becomes a lively interest. Nothing as rabid as Tony Robinson's 1500-metres Saxon burial dash, but compelling enough to finish a dull piece in the parish news about Cromwell watering his horses inside the local church. Here again that dangerous thing, a little knowledge, still leaves me vulnerable to drawing an Aztec wheel, or was it the Incas who didn't have it? The Mayans? Whatever, now I have the wit to seek reference to get the picture at least half right.

The technique from then on is easy to explain, but I have no idea how it works. The method is to insert oneself into the mind of a Minoan and superimpose a modern situation on an old one. This anomaly then has to be joined with a thread of logic, strong enough to hold it together but so feathery that it tickles the reader's sense of humour. I didn't say it was easy! Now it all becomes inexplicable because in the blind groping around in the imagination for a connection, the punchline suddenly materializes as solid as a brick; from where and how I do not know, and for any creative person to shout 'Eureka' is total fraud. 'IT has found ME' seems much more appropriate; but let's return to the Minoans. I'm a fan, partly for the girls' fabulous hairstyles and daring dress-sense, but mostly for the bull-jumpers. How can anyone go wrong with that for a place to kick off from, so let's start wondering? In those last awful moments as earthquake and tidal wave swept away the ringlets and topless gowns, did the golden youth of Crete have one last desperate fling at a new, exciting sport? Catastrophes are



'I see bull jumping's gone out of fashion!'

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always excellent material but so are the normal, everyday vicissitudes of daily life, constant in whatever age we live. After a hard day writing tax demands to the famous minor official in Kadesh, the last thing an Egyptian scribe would want on his way home is what? Traffic jam! Yes, but caused by what? Think!

Being a cartoonist is one step down from a policeman's lot. We both have the scene of crime and the clues if we can spot them! 'Let's go over that again, Lewis', says Inspector Morse and suddenly, on the tenth circuit, the solution appears. That's how it comes to me and, as in all mysteries, one answer leads to another question when the imagination is ticking. Why is it that if so many of the most interesting finds are made by simple Arabs tending their flocks, the British Museum doesn't have a resident shepherd? Consider the awesome advantages a highly qualified archaeologist with a Ph.D in Goat Husbandry would have in the field, plus the handy spin-off of cheese and milk!

It's a quirky business, laughing at and with the past, but the tapestry is so rich that it's virtually impossible not to find something. My pleasure in archaeology is the challenge of the Terracotta Navy, vandalized Herms, heart transplants in Chichen Itsa, gay Vikings and anything which can be lifted out of context and dropped back in slightly askew, wrong way round and upside down. Wonderful, enormously enjoyable, and I hope a little of the fun rubs off elsewhere.



'Downtown is flowing smoothly but there's quite a build-up northbound!'

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