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SITE SIGNIFICANCE: IDLE FANCY OR SOLOMON'S CHOICE?

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There is now a fair body of literature on the issue of site significance and site ranking (Greenberg, 1976; Groube, 1982; Lipe, 1974; McGimsey and Davis, 1977; Moratto and Kelly, 1976; Schiffer and House, 1977; U.S. Forest Service, 1973). I have elsewhere reviewed some of this literature in the context of New Zealand site surveys on land development blocks (Jones, 1981).

In adopting a stance on these issues a public archaeology unit has to decide whether it is a research unit, conducting research in the face of destruction by development of various kinds, or a unit devoted to establishing site museums, or a balance of these. The balance is not easily struck.

In adopting the second, the 'museum' approach, the object must be to secure physical pieces of ground either for the public to visit and gain a better understanding of the past, or as scientific reserves locked up for future research, the nature of which we do not yet know. The problem with this approach is that it can mistake the nature of archaeology, which is the art or science of studying and interpreting the decayed and biased (often in unknown ways) record of the past. Destruction may even be the channel by which we gain that understanding - for instance a quarry may cut through evidence of which we have no prior knowledge. And then the same development may seal off the record for the foreseeable future. The rebuilding of buried Londinium into the skyscraper city of modern London is an example. In addition, even the best register and preservation practice in the world is subject to accidents of misunderstanding, let alone malicious damage. The widespread, routine land cultivation of modern farming is seldom subject to control.

Site evaluation and preservation cannot therefore be seen as just desirable - it must be examined very closely as to its cost and the opportunities lost in achieving it.

If the decision to try to preserve is made, there is a fairly clear consensus as to the grounds on which it should be made:

1. To increase public understanding by providing places which people can visit to see and understand relics of the past.
2. To provide scientific/research reserves.

Groube (1982) has devised a number of grounds on which this can be based. These can be summarised in terms of his 'problem levels':

1a. The collection of facts, usually by excavation. A low value is placed on improving the sample by this means since, in Groube's opinion, archaeology is in part the art of conducting research on inadequate, fragmentary remains.

1b. Integrative problems, for example, drawing correlations among sites, detecting patterns, articulation of cultures; excavation is not integrative in character unless all otherwise available data have been assimilated.

1c. Theoretical problems which may not readily yield to empirical demonstrations such as the nature of culture change, etc.

2. Flow/feed back potential. The value of a site measured by its potential contribution to further research, and to raising the 'level' of the problem.

3. Local relevance. What is a relevant research problem in one place may not be relevant elsewhere.

With some minor modifications, and allowing for the inevitable problems of terminology, there is agreement between the kinds of significance defined by U.S. authors and those of Groube.

Groube also provides a model for the numerical ranking of site protection priorities. The judgement involved in placing a number on the factors which make up such rankings is the key to the credibility of such a system. This initial step may always be open to dispute, despite the apparent 'objectivity' of the final result.

Conclusion

A system of site ranking for preservation must be preceded by a pragmatic consideration of the likelihood of achieving the goal. Archaeology may be defined as the art of interpreting the largely destroyed relics of the past. Would archaeologists be better employed on the best possible archaeology in the face of inevitable destruction.

Note: The views expressed here are my own and should not be taken as the policy of the N.Z. Historic Places Trust.

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