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NEW ZEALAND ARCHAEOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION NEWSLETTER



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THE ORGANISATION OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL GROUPS

by J.R.S. Daniels

(This article is an abridged version of the Author's address to the opening session of the New Zealand Archaeological Association's Extended Annual Meeting, Queen's Birthday Weekend, 1963.)

In this article I want to go back to the essentials of group organisation and growth. Although my emphasis is on practical things, I believe that we cannot make best use of these unless we understand how voluntary organisations grow and function. It is the lack of this understanding that accounts for the failure of many well-intentioned attempts at voluntary association.

My remarks may seem rather superfluous to those with experience of a larger, well-established archaeological body, but I think they are most relevant to our New Zealand archaeological scene today. I am convinced that there is beginning a ground movement of growing awareness of and interest in archaeology similar to that of the early nineteen-fifties, and which culminated in the foundation of the Association. If this is so, many more centres are going to experience the problem of organising resources of manpower and knowledge that have faced established societies in past years.

First of all, then, let us examine the process by which people with a common purpose, ideal or activity - in our case archaeology - come together to pursue their aims.

In the beginning, of course, is the individual - for many years New Zealand archaeology's greatest strength. Men like Elsdon Best, Percy Smith and J.D.H. Buchanan (all archaeologists in the wider sense) worked without the support of others.

The second stage arrives when individuals coalesce into a loose, informal "group" to pool their resources and work together. In New Zealand archaeology this stage coincided with the first exercises in controlled excavation but it also resulted from an upsurge of interest in site recording, carried out by groups such as the Dominion Museum "field group". (Newsletter V.2, No. 4 pp. 15 - 19) which was formed in 1958 by Susan Davis, the Assistant Ethnologist at the Dominion Museum.

The formation of such a group means the creation of a definite entity, even though it is completely informal. There is no organisation, no administrative machinery and no formal membership. The strength of the group lies in the consensus among its members, in other words their complete agreement on aims and methods. This consensus, of course, is the reason for their coming together, for without this agreement they would continue to work as

individuals in only minimal contact with one another. Such a concensus makes for a cohesive group. Its fluid and flexible organisation enables it to meet changed circumstances without the difficulty that sometimes faces a highly organised body.

The disadvantages of such a group arise from its informal nature. It is financially weak, and is thus debarred from carrying out ambitious projects, particularly large-scale excavations. It is hard to avoid the growth of a clique as members get to know one another and, probably, agree more and more. There is not enough new blood introduced, partly because of the tendency towards the clique, and partly because other people are often simply not aware of the group's existence.

An organised group - a fully-fledged archaeological society - is likely to result directly from the growth of numbers of people interested in archaeology. Some sort of organisation becomes necessary if people are not to be actively excluded from the activities of the group. An organised society may also be formed out of a desire to include all those who have worked alone and who have not shared all the activities and aims of the loose group. This was the aim of those of us who in 1960, formed the Wellington Archaeological Society around the members of the loose Dominion Museum field group.

Immediate advantages follow from the formation of an organised society. It has status in its own right, and its views will carry more weight in the community than would those of unassociated individuals. The financial advantages do not need to be stressed; the ability to buy expensive equipment and to finance ambitious activities opens up new possibilities. Most important of all, the open membership of a society should mean a constant influx of new blood. The responsibility to keep membership really open must, of course, be recognised. It is no use setting up the superstructure of an organised society and trying to keep membership to the old loose, informal level.

The advent of a formal society inevitably means the disappearance of the concensus which we noted as a characteristic of the informal "loose group", this being replaced by a society of diverse elements with differing ideas and methods.

Organisation implies administration, with its directorate of committee, sub-committees and executive officers. It is my impression that one result of this organisation is to introduce an element of apathy straight away. Members of the society tend to feel that affairs are left safely in the hands of the committee and that they need make no effort themselves.

At this stage in the development of group organisation it is possible to see in the formal archaeological group the type of composition evident in any voluntary organisation, be it political party or football club. This is the division between those whom, to borrow a term from French political terminology, we may call the "militants", and the "rank and file". Any voluntary organisation is in danger of foundering if this division and its

purpose are not understood properly. Militants may be described as those for whom archaeology is something of a passion rather than a mild interest. They are the people who give the group its organic life and make it live. Everyone will have noted the difference between these people and the average interested member in any voluntary association. The proportion is often quite small. I should think that in the Wellington Archaeological Society, for example, it is not more than ten out of a membership of some 65.

Nevertheless, the group will in the long run prosper or decline according to the strength of its militants, and it is essential for the health of the group that they should emerge and take the leadership. It is not necessarily a matter for regret that many members are only mildly interested. They are the financial and manpower base on which the group's activities will be conducted, but there will be no activities at all without a core of militant members.

I mentioned above the varying interests found in the larger organised society. It cannot hope to hold its membership with only one sort of activity, and it is essential to cater for these varying interests as far as possible. This, after all, is one of the reasons why a formal group is brought into being - to hold together people with varying ideas and preferences.

I am firmly of the opinion that the society does not necessarily prosper if participation in activities is made too easy. In any activity (except talks) the sheer inertia produced by large numbers of spectators (as often as not rather unclear about what is being done) is very discouraging, and they will lose interest rapidly. It is better to keep activities at a level where members have to make some effort, where they will value their participation, and where a body of skilled workers will be produced. Unfortunately it is not always possible for our archaeological societies to do this with large numbers of people at present.

Probably the best way is through the small field group along the lines of that run by the Wellington Archaeological Society. The group holds regular site recording field days, which any Society member may take part in simply by getting in touch with one of the leaders. The result is a flexible group of manageable size, which has developed into a very efficient site recording unit.

In deciding what type of activities to follow, a society is always in danger of trying to over-extend its resources in trying to cope with the preferences of all types of members, while it would be better for it to limit activities more strictly. For this reason some of the emerging informal archaeological groups in New Zealand should not be too anxious to become formal bodies. They may work more efficiently as loosely organised groups, and there need be no shame attached to being in that category.

The emphasis on this paper has been on amateur participation in archaeology. However, one of the crucial points affecting the success of any group is the extent of expert participation and support available to it. (In the term "expert" I include professionals and people with a professional standard of training or experience). It goes without saying that all amateur groups need expert assistance and training. In all groups, professionals are only a small minority, but they must give the lead to a group's work, and, since all archaeological societies exist to advance archaeological knowledge, the groups must support those working in the advance guard of research.

3 The fact still remains, however, that at its present stage New Zealand archaeology largely depends on the enthusiasm and competence of its amateurs. Conditions make this inevitable. First of all there are simply very few professional archaeologists in our universities and museums. There is still really no official support for archaeology although there are the first glimmerings of awareness in Government and among local authorities that its claims deserve some attention. There is a limit to what a few people, however skilled, can accomplish. Archaeological groups and societies, therefore, must provide the organisational and manpower backing for the work of our scattered experts. Apart from this help no archaeologist can afford to be without the help that local groups can provide in local traditional and historical knowledge, and also in contributory disciplines such as geology and soil science.

How does this question of expert assistance affect the organisation of archaeological groups? I believe that a local society can function successfully without the participation of a professional archaeologist, although its activities must be severely curtailed. It is in these conditions, as the Wellington Archaeological Society has proved, that site recording comes into its own. This activity, however, still requires the presence in the group of a body of really experienced amateurs who can direct and educate unskilled and inexperienced new members. If these new members join an organised society they have a right to expect such training, and it is no use setting up the framework of an organisation if the knowledge to fill that framework and direct activities is not there. Where this is the case it may be better to avoid or postpone the founding of an organised society. It could well be that in some places where interest in archaeology is only beginning, it would be better to retain an informal organisation of the flexible ad hoc type I mentioned earlier.

The important point is that archaeology is not advanced one step by merely setting up a society, and that it may be better not to do this rather than to do it without the resources to make it work.