Kyngervi

TAG Deva, 17-19 December 2018, Chester, England

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TAG Deva 2018, held from the 17th to the 19th of December at the University of Chester, marked the fortieth Theoretical Archaeology Group conference, and fittingly, it covered a vast spectrum of theoretical strands old and new. While some session organisers chose the traditional session structure of a twenty-minute academic paper followed by questions, other favoured more unconventional approaches, such as ten-minute mini-presentations, round table debates, or Twitter sessions. The latter was perhaps the most exciting, as it allowed people who were otherwise unable to attend the conference to take part in the discussions. Each session also had its own hashtag on social media, which again allowed those not attending to access the presentations and discussions.

While the diverse nature of the session organisational tactics mirrored the wide range of ideas and approaches being presented at the conference, it did have the unfortunate effect of making it logistically challenging to move between sessions. Papers did not begin and end at the same time, so delegates could find themselves having to arrive or leave halfway through a paper. Another logistical decision that hindered proceedings was the staggered coffee breaks. While this was introduced presumably to alleviate queues at coffee points, it meant that those in sessions that had later breaks would get caught in already-extensive queues, and that some coffee points would run out of tea, coffee, and other drinks before delegates arrived. These issues aside, however, the papers themselves made the conference an overall positive experience.

The first session I attended was 'Feminist Archaeologies.' It proved an ideal starting point for the conference, as although its format was based on the traditional twenty-minute academic paper, the discussions and overall

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atmosphere felt more like the AGM of a grassroots movement. Anne Teather and Rachel Pope's 'Ten Years of British Women Archaeologists' gave an overview of the reasons that so many women leave archaeology in their 30s, such as lack of support, gendered promotion patterns, and sexual harassment in the field. While Teather and Pope's paper gave a bleak picture of systemic sexism, it also felt like a call to action – one that was picked up by many subsequent presenters, such as Trowelblazers' focus on the history and present activism of female archaeologists as a group rather than a series of remarkable individuals, and the importance of female mentoring networks. Enrique Moral de Eusebio and Lucy Shipley, meanwhile, shifted the focus to a more intersectional perspective, looking at race and gender in conjunction. Moral de Eusebio used the theoretical framework of the 'matrix of oppression', coined by Patricia Hill Collins, to approach the study of women in eighteenth-century Spanish Guam in the context of the overall social organisation in which intersecting oppressions are developed and perpetuated. Shipley, meanwhile, discussed the ways that present-day misogyny and exoticism/Othering 'bleeds in' to depictions of past femininities. While challenging, this session was among the most powerful that I attended.

The next morning, I attended 'Haunt This Place,' a session which prompted archaeologists to link their work to ghosts, landscape, and fantasy. Many papers, such as those by Penelope Foreman, Martyn Barber, and Krystyna Truscoe, used fantasy literature and ghost stories as a lens through which to view the processes and discoveries of archaeology. These included the blending of occultism and science in early twentieth-century archaeology, as discussed by Barber. However, one of the most fascinating papers was delivered by Lucy Talbot, who discussed her interdisciplinary project on the Crossbones Cemetery in Southwark, London. Over the course of her presentation, Talbot not only addressed archaeology, but the ways it overlaps with folklore, anthropology, and art. Her discussion of these creative and emotional responses to the Crossbones cemetery was at once poignant and academically rigorous, and illustrated the potential of archaeology when used in an interdisciplinary context.

The afternoon session I attended was entitled 'Birds, Beasts, and Other Fauna'. While this session drew on zooarchaeological sources, several of the speakers were from historical and literary disciplines. Susan Stallibrass' paper on the hunt in pre- and post-Christianisation Roman Britain started the session well by discussing not only the ways in which humans created breeds of hunting dog, but also addressed the possible religious dimensions of the hunt as a ritual. Religion and ritual was also prominent in Luke John Murphy and Carly Ameen's discussion of the elusive notion of a 'British hare goddess,' and its connections to popular misconceptions of Ishtar and Eostre. Klaudia Karpińska's paper on birds in Viking Age Scandinavian burials likewise touched upon the possible symbolic aspects of birds in ritual contexts, as food for the afterlife and/or symbols of resurrection. One of the most interesting papers was Shirley Kinney's discussion of badgers in the early middle ages. Kinney drew upon medical texts, bestiaries, and archaeological sources to discuss the reasons why badgers appear to have held links with healing. While this session may not have been as deeply theoretical as some of the others on offer, it demonstrated that the 'animal turn' in disciplines such as medieval studies can still yield significant new perspectives and facilitate interdisciplinary research on familiar sources.

On the first session of the final day, I attended a session on the question of non-human agency and flat ontology. In some ways, it mirrored the preceding session on animals in archaeology, as the focus was on the importance of the non-human in the traditionally anthropocentric discipline of archaeology. Some papers, such as Kevin Chew and Joanna Lawrence's 'From the Bronze Age to Bambi,' took a more narrative approach to particular case studies. In this paper, Chew and Lawrence discussed how lived experiences of human-animal interaction changed artistic representations of animals from emblematic to more detailed renditions. They also addressed how human-animal relationships are mediated by media and material culture.

However, the majority of the papers in this session prioritised more abstract theoretical and ideological matters. The chairs' introduction took the form of a paper itself. They raised concerns that a theoretical focus on agency could be playing into a neoconservative view of society as a collection of

individual agents, and that placing things on an ontological level with humans could damage archaeology's potential to create social critiques of human actions. Robert Preucel's paper likewise raised concerns that flat ontologies could gloss over humans' moral and social responsibility, and Alicia Núñez-García discussed the ways in which flat ontologies are symptomatic of a Western consumerist attitude that considers objects as things that are simply manufactured, rather than looking at the craftsmanship and intention that go into processes of creation. A recurrent strand of argument found in papers by both Timothy Taylor and Oliver Harris was that 'agency' may be the wrong term, and that perhaps flat ontologies should be more concerned with 'affect,' as all relationships cause affect in the sense of one entity 'pressing into' another. Harris in particular argued that affect-based ontologies can retain social critique through 'relational politics,' politicised representations of the non-human and of relationships between entities. This session illustrated the importance of reflexive critique in theory: although these papers used flat ontologies as a theoretical starting point, their central concern was not to use it as a mere tool, but to highlight and build upon its shortcomings.

The final session I attended was 'Integrating Theory and Science in Archaeology.' This was one of the sessions that consisted of ten-minute presentations, usually of a case study or brief project outline. Both Rose Malik and Konstantinos Trimmis discussed the role of senses in archaeology. Malik was concerned with the archaeology of smell in practice, while Trimmis looked at the potential of thick description in recreating the 'palaeosensory environment,' but both presenters gave compelling arguments for the importance of sensory experience in understanding past cultures. Another thematic strand linking several papers was that of ethnicity and ancestry. Tom Booth's paper 'What Did the Cheddar Man Look Like and Why Does it Matter?' challenged archaeology as a discipline to stop relying upon the trope of 'our ancestors,' arguing that it acts as a dogwhistle to racist politics, and Jessica Bates compared research into prehistoric genetics with theoretical work into ethnic identities to argue that archaeologists need to distinguish between genetic ethnicity and an individual's own socially-situated sense of identity.

Overall, TAG Deva faced some logistical challenges, but the papers themselves displayed the potential for archaeology to engage with theory in ways that seek to engage in wider social and political issues including misogyny, racism, identity, and moral responsibility. The widespread use of social media fora and the scheduled use of rooms as 'quiet spaces' showed that efforts were being made toward accessibility, although my position as an able-bodied attendee means I am not fully qualified to evaluate the effectiveness of all measures taken. From an academic perspective, however, TAG Deva showed that more conferences should take the initiative to address theory head-on, as the results can prove engaging and above all constructive.