

Selection, de-selection and rationalization: the contractors' view

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When I first proposed that I speak to you all about “Selection, de-selection and rationalization” from the point of view of the contractor, I realised that although I had opinions these might not necessarily be shared by others. I thought therefore that as I was aiming to try and show the views of contractors in general, I would ask some of my colleagues both at Albion and those involved with Archives in other contracting units, for their thoughts. I also spoke to planning archaeologists about where they felt that the contractors' place in any selection process was.

Generally contractors would very much welcome clear guidance on selection especially where a museum has no archaeological keeper. However there are a few concerns that were highlighted from my discussions with others. I wanted to look at several questions and asked for comments on these from others as well as asking their opinion on all aspects.

Throughout the discussions it became clear that on all points we considered that we need to have ongoing discussion with the planning archaeologists, specialists and museums (whether they had archaeologists or not).

Q: Do you think we should make sure any selection policies are discussed on a more regular basis throughout the life of a project (mainly so that any finds can be returned to where they came from)?

This provoked an interesting discussion with the people whom I spoke to. It was seen as something that should be discussed in the Brief, and also the Written Scheme of Investigation (WSI). One of the problems that was highlighted was where only a generic brief is produced which is not specific to the actual site. In any case it was then seen that the WSI is the planning document once it has been read and accepted by any planning archaeologists, and the brief will then effectively be irrelevant.

Selection policies were seen by some to be down to the contractor as they ought to know the archaeological significance of the finds. They should also be in a position to advise any specialists in a selection process. Some felt that this should be a discussion within the unit and should involve project managers, finds teams and archive teams. It was agreed that such discussions should start at the outset of the site or as soon as possible after excavation and should be continued during assessment, then any final selection could be done carried out during archive preparation.

Others suggested that planning archaeologists should not only be involved in any decisions surrounding the importance of the archaeology of any particular site and assemblage, but should lead the way. Planning archaeologists should be able to look at the site in relationship to any research objectives and with the expert knowledge of other sites in the area. This is especially relevant today, where several units may have excavated in the surrounding area, sometimes with little knowledge of each other's results.

Q: How as contractors can we help museums lacking archaeological expertise in deciding what is kept for the sake of future research?

We have, as a profession, enormous experience in collecting and studying material. Regional research agendas can be cited as guidance. And discussion should be had at the outset of a project, with updates as appropriate and if something unexpected comes along.

Some museums understand what is needed and some have very clear collecting policies. They obviously vary and some operate a collecting policy that specifies retaining all finds for future research (for want of any expertise to determine otherwise). This can be seen by contractors as an issue, especially where they may feel there is no beneficial reason to retain some material (for example from a layer containing several sacks of kiln waste or unstratified unworked building stone).

Conversely, anecdotal evidence suggests that some museums consider their display requirements to be the paramount criterion governing finds retention, and that this could lead to finds with a value for further research (from an archaeological point of view) being discarded. How can we encourage these museums that such material is needed for future analysis and comparison? 'Collection' is very different to 'archive' and the integrity of the latter is being compromised by an emphasis on the former. What happens if that archive is then subsumed into another 'collection' - does it get rationalised again? At what point does the archive's integrity get compromised?

On one hand a museum's collecting policy should be key to any discussion on finds retention, but if they only want display material, isn't this technically the same as a landowner cherry-picking 'nice' finds?

Again this could be seen as something that the planning archaeologists should be involved with. As contractors, however, we find that some planning archaeologists seem to have little or no contact with the museums they are asking us to deposit with, especially those museums which have no archaeological curator.

Q: Will we be seen as just throwing stuff away?

This is a thorny issue. If we decide that we should select finds on whatever criteria is decided, then it may be seen that this is happening. However, if you ask some members of the public they seem surprised that we keep every sherd or all the fragmented bones.

Unless everyone signs up to dealing with the issue of retention then the alternative is to fill museum stores or indeed contractors' stores. Again this is very difficult: will contractors take decisions on collections they have to store depending on the costs involved rather than necessarily the archaeological benefit? One would hope not.

Q: How do we reconcile landowners with the fact that we tell them some of their objects are worthwhile and the rest are not

We always tell landowners that their artefacts are not of any monetary value, but 'have a value for future research', as an incentive for them to sign them off.

We should tell them at the beginning of the work that a collection policy may be in place and that the museum/repository may not like to keep all the finds; we should perhaps also ask them if they would like those finds not retained to be returned to them, or if they could be kept for educational purposes or disposed of in an appropriate manner. Again something that needs to be considered, is that we cannot throw away large quantities of material to be found at a later date in a random place. Although the ideal would be to return them to the site where they were recovered, this would usually be impracticable due to the timing of any implementation of the retention policy. In best practice, a Transfer of Title (ToT) can be in place early on, with subsequent updates to the client. To be fair, most landowners aren't necessarily interested, unless they think there's a monetary value.

There is a question, however, over the legality of any dispersal of material before the landowner has signed off the ToT. What happens if they want the finds back?

If some specially designed body took on all the consent from the landowners before deposition we could look at national solutions. We could then rationalise without ever having to have the conversation with the original landowner over why some classes of material don't need to be kept. This would also protect finds from sites with no museum provision etc. and be the start of a national index - even perhaps moving towards a national store!

Q: Are there going to be incidents where we will feel as contractors that the finds are important for the site, but that retention would be in conflict with the museum's collecting policy?

Yes, and we should be able to argue our case, based on specialist advice.

We know that there can be a potential discrepancy between what archaeologists think is important (for future research), and what museums think is important (for display purposes). It's crucial therefore that any discussion about a selection strategy takes place from the beginning of the project, and involving all parties. While this might be the ideal, however, there is not always time for it, especially with the current pressures on planning archaeologists. The attention of the latter may also be more focused on the digging process, rather than on the material collected.

If museums and/or planning archaeologists cannot (or will not) contribute to this discussion, then it's down to us as contractors to propose a strategy based on specialist recommendations. I don't think we should be afraid of saying something's not worth keeping if it really has little or no future potential. This might apply just as much to a small archive in total, as to specific object/material categories. We are still faced with the situation that we can make recommendations, but the museum isn't obliged to accept them, isn't interested in the material, and could at a later date dispose of the material, but at least if we have tried to instigate discussion at an early point in the project, then alternative arrangements for deposition might be made.

Other considerations

It's important to stress that whatever we decide in the way of selection/retention, it should never be based on financial considerations. This is perhaps going to be more difficult to sustain if museums continue to raise their storage charges to what some contractors may see as impractical levels - however much we want to deny it, financial considerations are an issue to some and can be seen as important as the professional imperative to maintain a full archive.

It is sometimes assumed that contractors would want to reduce archive content to reduce box charges. In some cases this may be true, especially where the cost of depositing any archive is considered to be disproportionately expensive (costs are widely variable across the country, varying from around £15 to up to £400 per box). This can be seen as an issue particularly where the museum increases its charges before deposition and applies them retrospectively (where no extra funds are available). The issue of storage charges can be an emotive one, but we should be aware that generally the box storage grant levied does not in any way cover the cost of storage 'in perpetuity'.

We are increasingly hearing that museums have no space to accept archaeological archives, and some close their doors with little or no notice. This can lead to storage and selection issues for contractors. The FAME survey of 2012 recorded over 9000 homeless archives held by contracting units that could not be deposited with museums. Since that survey the number has increased; these archives are being held by contractors and as such may not be accessible. Now, this should never be a factor in any selection process, but some contractors may see the financial pressures of continued storage as a reason to consider de-selecting parts of the finds archive, especially where no store looks likely to materialise in the near future. If, on the other hand, a reasonably robust selection policy was in place, then contractors should not be able to choose to select purely on the number of boxes they want deposit.

At the very least we need all specialists to state what needs to be kept and why, and a recognition that lack of funding for full analysis is a valid reason for keeping an archive material group even if only until it can be fully analysed; again, this should be where input from contractors, planning archaeologists and specialists can help. Some museums without archaeological expertise are very keen to receive advice. Might there be a conflict, though, if different contractors provide differing advice? For example, Unit A might excavate a site and decides (for the sake of argument) that undiagnostic pottery should not be retained; then Unit B excavates the site next door and retains the same material.

The last point that was mentioned and is of some relevance is:

Other considerations why don't people read NPPF? Archaeological works undertaken under NPPF should follow these requirements

NPPF requires us to preserve the significance and enhance value. That significance or enhancement has to be robust in planning terms, NOT any other terms that archaeologists care to make up just because they think they are important. Have any of our criteria for what we as archaeologists require for the archive been tested against criteria we are supposed to use for measuring significance in the planning process?

The planning applicant, through the contractors they employ, has every right to present an argument as to how they are going to use the archive to preserve the significance and/or enhance the heritage asset. The selection policy should be tested against this argument using the tools that we have, not any other argument. The tools that we have need to be sufficiently robust to stand up to scrutiny. In planning terms, selection criteria might vary depending on the condition, the local plans in place, research agendas, etc, and how the arguments for significance are presented and agreed.

At present, museum collection policies that do not fit in with significance under NPPF are irrelevant in that planning process, but not necessarily in terms of professional best practice. If the collecting body wishes to keep any additional archive or if the 'profession' requires something different then this should be done at cost to the collecting body or made explicit in planning policy.

Different archives, and different parts of the archive, will have different significance; where archives, or parts of them, are less significant then why do they need to be kept in perpetuity? Why shouldn't the archive have a shelf life that depends on its significance? Once the site has been written up we don't necessarily have to keep sufficient material to re-create the whole record as long as we know how the conclusions were arrived at, e.g. original contexts vs database, all sherds of pottery vs catalogue. NPPF clearly says that we are preserving significance, which means that the assumption has to be that the archive will be discarded unless keeping it can be argued against the criteria we have for measuring significance. Similarly if permission was granted because it would result in an enhanced asset (quite likely for low grade archaeology not covered by the research agenda) then the archive might be deposited as a teaching collection or a reference collection under different deposition criteria.