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12. Encountering the past through slag and storytelling

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Abstract

Storytelling is a powerful medium for communicating information, ideas, values and the ‘aura’ of the past to a wide range of audiences. It can engender closer listening and deeper engagement. Academic discourse, on the other hand, brings the benefits of reasoned argument, responsibility to the evidence, and systematic referencing. For the academic storyteller, a hybrid narrative combines the strengths of both of these approaches: it encourages the audience to think through the context in much greater detail and explicitly make the connections between the different elements of evidence. It can also be transformative in terms of the teller’s own perspective and values.

To explore these ideas, I tell a story set at the Late Roman-period copper mine of Skouriotissa in Cyprus, where the Troodos Archaeological and Environmental Survey Project recorded slag heap sections, surface pottery, and a range of other archaeological remains. The story is told in my own voice, but incorporates an encounter with a mysterious figure who apparently has direct, sensory experience of the material I am recording and researching. Telling the story then enables me to reflect on the power and benefits of academic storytelling as a means of communication and research.

Introduction

One hot summer about 15 years ago, an archaeologist was working on the edge of a huge modern copper mine in Cyprus, plotting the distribution of ancient pottery, figuring out the broader context, and trying to help his archaeometallurgical colleagues with the recording of a massive Late Roman slag heap. Perhaps it was the heat, or perhaps he ended up thinking about slag more than was good for him, but, whatever the cause, he suddenly realised that he had lost all confidence in what he was doing. His pottery distribution maps looked abstract and irrelevant, his contextual analysis was impossibly distant from any real human lives, and his accounts of the organisation of Roman copper mining seemed both meaningless and dull.

There being few other genuine options available, he kept going. As tends to happen during archaeological survey, he met all sorts of different and interesting people who lived and worked round about the copper mine. They told him a bewildering variety of stories about their lives and what had

happened in their landscapes. And that made him begin to think rather differently about what he was doing. Perhaps all the maps, section drawings and contextual analyses do not tell the whole story. So he decided that he would try to find new ways that do.

Fifteen years later, I have told that story and others in various different venues, ranging from lecture theatres and conference sessions to village halls and school classrooms. And this experience has indeed made me think differently. Telling a story about Roman copper mining, for example, has directly impacted the formal and rather theoretical academic paper that I wrote about slag (Given 2018).

Archaeologists see slag as a proxy for a complex technical process, but what did the miners and smelters think about it? Slave labour in Roman copper mines was clearly cruel and oppressive, but how did that play out in the experiences of particular individuals in particular mining galleries?

Below I have done my best to translate that story, presented orally, into the written word. Much has been lost: that immediate rapport that can build up between teller and listener, the atmosphere of the room, the collective engagement of the audience, the terracotta oil lamp suddenly pulled out of a pocket to illustrate the narrative, the clear anguish in the archaeologist-storyteller's voice as he finds himself in a position his academic upbringing cannot deal with. But narrative that is written and read can be a powerful medium too, communicating a sense of place, an engagement with material culture, and a compelling interpretation of the past.

So here is the story. A few people have asked if it is true, and many more have clearly wanted to ask. My answer to them is simple: it is a story; it has many truths. After the story, I will put on my academic voice again, give some facts, data and references, and then reflect on how useful storytelling can be for archaeological and academic practice.

Slag: the story

A few years ago, I was working in the intense sun of a Cypriot summer, helping my colleagues record and map a Roman slag heap. It was vast: 330m long, between 10 and 50m wide, and up to 18m high. This was the Skouriotissa slag heap, evidence of the huge scale of the copper mining and smelting operation that took place during the Roman and Late Roman periods on Cyprus. This slag heap was the centrepiece of our research into ancient copper mining, as part of the Troodos Archaeological and Environmental Survey Project.



Figure 1. Section through part of the Roman-period slag heap at Skouriotissa, 26 July 2005 (Michael Given)

Covered in sweat and black dust from the slag, we drew the layers, took samples of slag and pottery, identified workshop floors, and used a total station to take points for a contour map. We were gradually working out the sequence of smelting operations: ore, flux and charcoal went into the clay furnaces; when the smelt was finished the slag was tapped out through a hole in the side; the furnace was broken open to extract the lump of 'matte' or impure, unrefined copper; the slag cake and the remains of the furnace were smashed up and levelled to provide a new working floor; and the whole process started again. The more we scrutinised the face of the slag heap, the more we were able to spot the successive layers of slag, the workshop floors, and the pieces of charcoal, some of which still revealed the branches from which they were made. It didn't help us that every ten minutes we were covered in the choking dust that billowed along behind the huge trucks of the modern mining operation, which were carrying ore from the open-cast pit up on the mountain down to the leaching piles below.

Just as I was holding my breath for another of the trucks to pass, it juddered and crashed to a halt just beside me. Its dust-covered driver opened the hatch and climbed down the ladder from his driving cab. It towered above him, the top of the front wheel higher than his head. As he turned towards me, I saw

the streaks of dust and sweat on his gaunt face. He removed his google to show white rings round dark, intense eyes that peered suspiciously at me, screwed up against the harsh light.

He gestured towards the slag heap, and gave the characteristic Cypriot turn of the finger and shake of the head that means, ‘What are you doing? Explain yourself!’ I began telling him about the slag heap, and why we were recording it. In the Roman and Early Byzantine periods, Cyprus was one of the largest producers of copper in the Mediterranean, I said, trying to impress him, and this was by far and away the biggest operation on the island. The copper that came from here and left this enormous pile of slag went on to make up bronze coins and statues across the entire empire. But he flapped his hand at me and strode towards the face of the heap. He gestured at a slag cake, and with the same turn of his finger asked silently what it was.

Again, I explained. It was the waste product from the smelting, I said, and it contained the rock and metals such as iron and manganese that did not go into the ingot of unrefined copper. The slag also contained a tiny amount of copper: by the Late Roman period the process was so efficient that the slag usually contained less than one per cent copper. When the workers judged that the smelt was finished, they drilled a hole in the side of the clay furnace. The molten slag dribbled out and solidified, hence the strange dribbles on the surface of the slag cake that the old man was crouching over.

Once again, he interrupted me, suddenly jabbing his finger at the surface of the slag cake. ‘Blood,’ he hissed. ‘It is blood, and flesh, and sweat’. He stood up and glared at me. I stared blankly back at him. ‘You do not believe me. I will show you.’ He turned and pointed to the modern mine towering above us. ‘Sunday. The top of the mine. The middle of the day. I will show you.’ Without waiting for a response, he scrambled up the ladder back into his driving cab, and with a snarl of its diesel engine the huge truck lumbered off down the road, the ore crashing and rumbling as the truck hit the pot holes.

I had to get back to work, and, perhaps fortunately, my colleagues had not stopped to listen or watch what the old man was doing. They were excited by some particularly well-preserved fragments of pottery that they were finding in several layers of the slag heap. These showed us that most of the copper production happened in the fifth to seventh centuries AD. According to our Roman pottery specialist, these fragments of tiles and amphorae belonged to exactly the same types that our survey teams were finding at a whole series of small sites in the valley and plains around the mine. Miners had to eat, of course. Were these small sites in fact the farmsteads and agricultural estates that produced grain and olive oil for the miners? It would make sense that both the mine and its agricultural suppliers used the same tile and pottery manufacturers.

These preliminary ideas and theories gave me lots to think about, but as the rest of the week went by, I kept wondering about what the old man had said. I’d look at a slag cake, with its dribbles of molten slag suddenly frozen as they ran out the hole tapped in the side of the furnace. What actually was this stuff? Iron oxide, silica, sulphur, manganese, some residual copper, and trace elements of zinc and barium, as

my archaeometallurgist colleagues told me? Or were there other, more human trace elements, that the chemical wizardry of the XRF back in the lab couldn't detect?

When it came to the agreed time, of course, I couldn't resist going to the mine to see what he had to show me. On Sundays the mine is closed, and there is nothing to stop you driving up, provided you keep out of sight of the Greek Cypriot National Guard observation posts looking northwards across the United Nations Buffer Zone. By midday on Sunday, after some careful navigation, I was walking through the outlandish colours of the modern mine, towards the huge open cast pit. Reminding myself of what I had learnt from our archaeometallurgists, I tried to identify what I saw: the glistening greenish-grey of the ore in the side of the pit; the outcrops of yellow ochre, used as a flux to lower the melting point of the copper; the splashes of orange and rust-red from the oxidised iron that told the ancient prospectors where the copper-bearing chalcopyrite ore lay underneath. The air was hot and dry, the mine a barren chemical kaleidoscope that seemed remote from the lives and stories of individual humans.



Figure 2. The open cast pit at Skouriotissa copper mine, 26 July 2005 (Michael Given)

There was no sign of the old man, so I walked a little way along the edge of the pit. I had been in the mine before, though unlike now that had been an 'official' visit. We had found out that the miners had discovered a huge mass of ancient amphora fragments while they were extending the open-cast pit. We asked the manager of the mine about it, and although they had been dumped in an inaccessible area, he

kindly arranged for a couple of bucket loads to be brought round to the back of the mining headquarters for us to look at. Mining engineers think big: those two ‘bucket loads’ turned out to be 21m³ of Roman amphora sherds, stained yellow from their centuries in the copper mine. Clearly ancient miners thought on a large scale as well. What were they doing with such vast numbers of these bulbous two-handled pots, normally used for transporting olive oil, wine or water? Our Roman pottery specialist worked out that they were only of two different types, probably locally made, though she had identified the same types in some neighbouring agricultural sites. Could they be for bringing in water for the miners? For bailing out the mine? Either way, goatskins would seem to be lighter and make more sense.

As I walked to and fro, I began to notice that every now and then there was a tunnel going into the ore body. The miners of the first half of the twentieth century who had dug the open-cast pit didn’t use such galleries, so these must be earlier. Could they be contemporaneous with our Roman slag heap? I looked round, wondering about the chronology, and saw that the old man had suddenly appeared in the mouth of one of the galleries. He stood motionless, staring intently at me as if he had been watching me. In his hand he held what was quite clearly a Roman oil lamp, the tiny flame from its coarse string wick almost invisible in the sunlight. Without a word, he turned and vanished into the gallery.

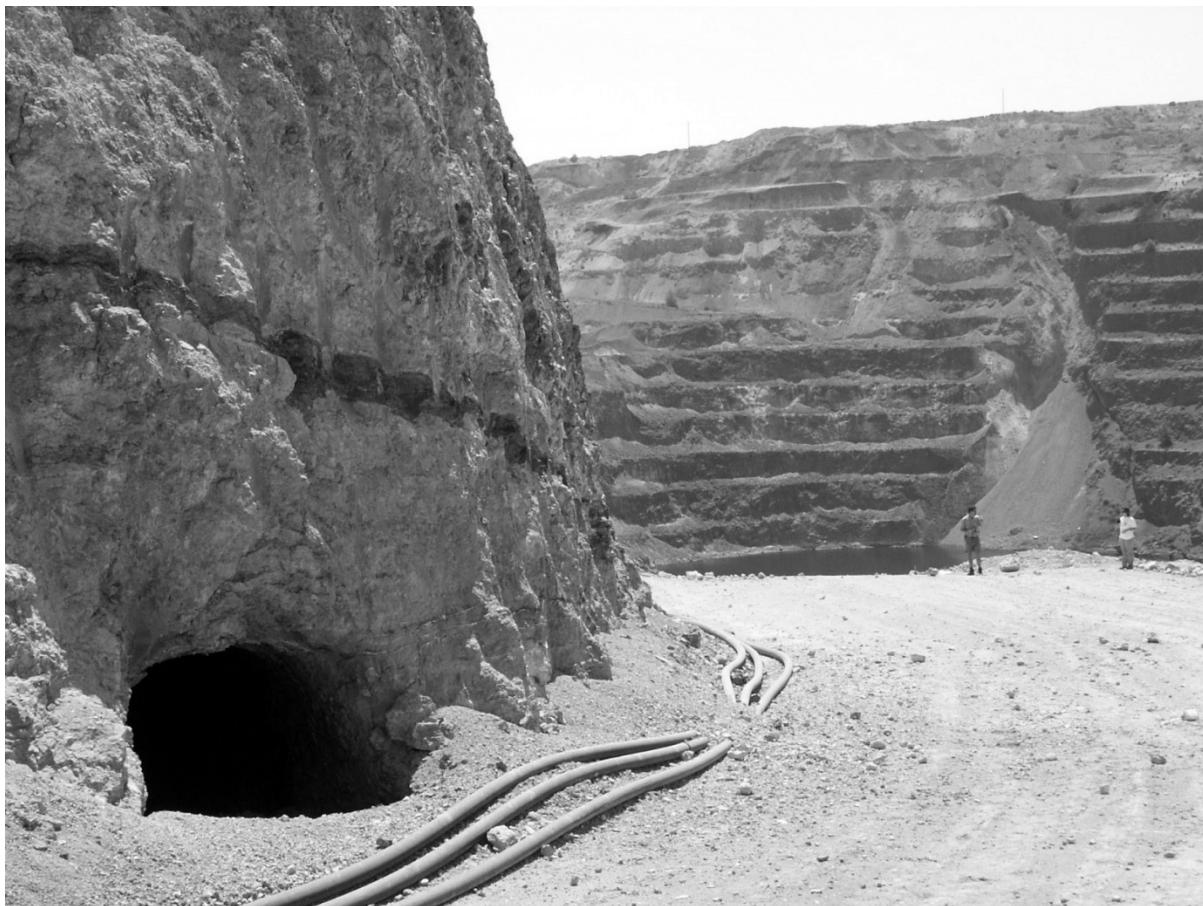


Figure 3. Skouriotissa mine with adit, 13 July 2003 (Michael Given)

I had no way of knowing whether the gallery was safe. I had no hard hat, and no torch – and neither did the old man, clearly. No one knew where I was. But my own health and safety briefings vanished from my head as I turned to follow him, and the next thing I knew I was bent double, following him into the dark tunnel. The walls at first were ochre and rust-coloured with the iron oxides, but soon there were bands of the greeny-grey chalcopyrite that formed the long sought-after copper ore. The heat was intense, the air sulphurous and stifling. I stumbled along, treading in the flickering shadow cast by the old man with the oil lamp held in front of him.

Abruptly, he stopped. He turned and hissed, ‘Listen! You must listen!’. I stopped, and tried to quieten my breathing. Nothing. ‘You must listen!’, he repeated. He picked up a handful of dust and ore fragments from the floor, and let it slide through his fingers. It trickled and rattled faintly onto the rock floor. ‘If you hear that, you must get out.’

He continued on, and soon we began to pass wooden pit props every couple of metres, preserved beautifully in the acid conditions of the mine. My first thought was, ‘Dendrochronology!’. They had to be Roman, and contemporaneous with our slag heap; it would be wonderful to take a section of one. But once again he hissed, ‘Listen!’. He tapped a pit prop with his knuckles. It made a dull, solid knocking. ‘When you hear them creaking, you must get out’.

We continued our slow progress into the mountain. One stretch had no pit props; perhaps the ancient miners had decided the rock was more solid. The old man picked up a lump of ore from the ground and hammered it briefly against the ceiling. It made a hard, strong thudding noise. He nodded. ‘That is good. When it echoes, you must get out’. But a sudden change came over his face, in the dull glow of the oil lamp he held below him, deepening the lines each side of his mouth and casting his eyes into pools of darkness that shifted and danced in the flickering of the tiny flame. ‘Sometimes you hear it through the mountain’, he whispered. ‘It thunders, and you do not know where in the mountain it is. Then a long rumbling’. He pushed his face angrily into mine, his eyes invisible in his own shadow. ‘And you know what they take out of the mine when that happens, after you hear that rumbling in another tunnel?’. He spat on the ore-flecked ground. ‘Haima kai kreas. Blood and flesh, and the hands and legs of miners. That is your slag, your copper, your bronze coins and statues. Haima kai kreas. Blood and flesh’. He looked forwards to where the pit props started again, and cried out in a sudden anguish, ‘How can a timber hold up a mountain?’.

I said nothing. We continued on our way. Once again, he stopped, and put his hand down to pick up something from the floor. I looked into the little pool of lamplight, and recognised immediately what it was. The old man turned the yellow-stained lump of pottery slowly over in his hand. It was the strengthened toe of an amphora, I saw, where it came to a point at the bottom. ‘These were the worst’, he whispered. The anger came back into his voice. ‘All because of those fancy doctors and rich city

patients, who wanted their foul medicine, their copper salts and vitriols'. He swallowed, and bowed his head for a minute without speaking. When he resumed, it was in a low, flat voice. 'There was a tunnel, a deep one. At the bottom the water was warm and yellow, and it stank. The poison in the air put out the lamps, and we could not breathe, and it was so hot we could wear nothing. So we had to run, run bent over, as fast as we could, so we could get out again and breathe, and carry this huge heavy jar, and fill it with the poison, and run back again carrying it'.

His eyes widened as he saw again the rows of amphorae, the yellow stinking water, the oil lamps extinguished in their little niches in the rock. 'We could not breathe!' he cried. Suddenly he was fighting me, grappling with me, and it took me a moment of panic before I realised he was struggling to get past me in a panic of fear and memory. I crouched on the floor and he scrambled across me and fled back towards the daylight, bent double, his long cry echoing down the gallery behind him.

I groped in front of me and put my hand into a little puddle of oil. Beside it was his lamp, but it had gone out and there was no way of re-lighting it. I picked my way slowly and painfully back along the gallery, and finally emerged into the blinding sunlight. There was no sign of the old man, and I never saw him again.

The next day, I worked on the face of the slag heap with my colleagues, listening to them argue about sampling strategies, and trying to figure out the complex stratigraphy. This was essential, I thought, if you're going to understand an ancient copper mine. You need the stratigraphy, the chemistry, the geology, the pottery and all the rest of it. But there was more to it than that. Slag was made of more than iron oxide and magnesium. As I worked, I couldn't help looking at the strange dribbly texture of the slag cakes. 'Blood and sweat', I thought; and, 'You must listen'.



Figure 4. Slag cake from Skouriotissa, c. 60 cm wide, showing the solidified dribbles of molten slag tapped out of the furnace (starting from the edge at the bottom of the photo), 6 August 2001 (Chris Parks)

The facts?

The massive Late Roman slag heap at Skouriotissa had some two million tons of slag, almost all of it dating from the fourth to seventh centuries AD. Its structure, stratigraphy and composition were meticulously recorded and analysed by Vasiliki Kassianidou and her team of archaeometallurgists, and integrated with the results of the surface survey, artefact analysis and mapping, and the historical and archival information (Boutin *et al.* 2013: 114-38; Georgakopoulou & Kassianidou 2013).. The analysis carried out by our Roman pottery specialist, Kristina Winther-Jacobsen, was particular important (Boutin 2013: 118-33). There are many Roman-period adits and galleries that have been sectioned by modern mining operations at Skouriotissa and elsewhere in Cyprus (Boutin *et al.* 2013: 117-18; Graham *et al.* 2013: 172-77; Van Lokeren *et al.* 2003: 168-75).

One of the most remarkable finds at Skouriotissa was an enormous deposit of broken amphorae encrusted with copper salts, virtually all of them of only two local types dating to the second century AD. The ‘small’ sample that the mining company gave us came to 21m³. Of the various possible explanations for this deposit, the most likely is that the amphorae were used for the collection, from sumps within

the mine, of water full of copper salts valued for their medical properties (Boutin *et al.* 2013: 118–120; Jacobsen 2007).



Figure 5. Examining the redeposited amphorae fragments, 23 July 2003 (Michael Given)

The best evidence for the use of these amphorae is from a passage written by the Roman physician Galen when he visited either Skouriotissa or the neighbouring mine of Mavrovouni in AD 166:

But to me all the times I descended to the end of the tunnel where the warm and green yellowish water was collected, the smell of the air which smelled of khalkitis and copper rust seemed to me to be stifling and oppressive. The taste of the water was the same. The naked slaves brought up the amphorae running and they could not stand to stay there for a long time, but quickly ascended. (Galen *De Temp. Fac. Simp. Med.* 9, in Wallace & Orphanides 1990: 227).

My character's anguished cry, 'How can a timber hold up a mountain?', is a quote from a compelling and dramatic narrative by a Virginian third-generation coal miner, Earl E. Scott (Harvey 2005). Earl could discern and interpret "the voices of the mines that 'speak' a series of warnings", particularly through the tapping of the roof and the answer to that tapping given by the mine (*ibid.*: 75–6). The role of listening

in my story is not just an essential survival technique for a miner: it is a central theme in the narrator's growing ability to approach the otherness of a different culture. For an archaeological storyteller, listening is the key to the success.

Storytelling and archaeology

As archaeologists, we communicate what we think about the past. We inform, persuade, argue, justify, challenge, engage, sometimes shock. Academic writing and speaking can be blunt tools to achieve this. We are so determined to show our sources and reasoning that we end up distancing ourselves and our audience from the past people and societies with whom we are trying to engage. So often our writing ends up being 'dry, uninspired, uninspiring, uncreative, unimaginative, cold, inhuman, perverse' (Boivin 1997: 106). Compare that to the power of storytelling; think of that magical moment when a deep silence suddenly falls on the room, with everyone utterly focused on you and your story. This gives the archaeologist-storyteller power – and responsibility.

A story is a challenge to an archaeological author: we are forced to face up to the questions we usually ignore. What did people wear? What was it really like to smelt copper? How long did they work? What did they eat? Who did the cooking? What did they think of this pot, this building, this copper mine, this cake of slag? What were the adventures of this oil lamp during its long life? These questions, so familiar to the historical novelist, are all too easily pushed aside by the academic archaeologist as extraneous and irrelevant to the research questions (Ripanti & Osti, this volume).

But what about the facts? You can't just make things up!

Even facts can be conveyed by stories. This is one of the responsibilities of the storytelling archaeologist: to communicate and interpret the data rigorously and fairly. The deciding issue here is not the medium. Academic works can be grossly incorrect or even counter-factual (a thought experiment, for example), while historical fiction can be scrupulously researched with their artefacts and buildings based firmly on surviving examples (in the novels of contributor to this volume Victoria Thompson (published under the name V.M. Whitworth), for example; see also Wickham-Jones, this volume). There are clearly risks that a storyteller or novelist will not be responsible or rigorous in their use of the material evidence for the past. But the same applies to academic writing: there is a risk that the allure of the hypothesis will sweep counter-evidence under the carpet, or that there will be gaps in the evidence, or a systematic cultural or disciplinary bias. What matters is the author of both fiction and academic writing taking responsibility for their material, and building up their authority in their story or text so that readers and listeners will trust them. One way by doing this, of course, is by using references. Another is an appendix that explains the archaeological evidence. My story here uses both.

But even if the oil lamp is based on an artefact, it's still just a story!

As any parent knows, there is no such thing as ‘just’ a story. Fiction can be a powerful medium for the communication of truths; that is why it is ‘necessary’, not just a vehicle for entertainment. Fiction can set up new understandings, new paradigms, whole new worlds for playing, thinking and learning. Do you want to come to terms with the inherent slipperiness of language and meaning? Read James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. Do you want to brainstorm on the ultimate result of rampant capitalism and the genetic modification of food? Read Paolo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*. Do you want to immerse yourself in the social fabric of Anglo-Saxon England? Read Victoria Whitworth’s *Wulfgar* novels. It is on this level of understanding that archaeology at its most interesting operates – engaging with the situations, challenges, dilemmas, experiences of past communities and societies, and through that thinking about our own (see also Elphinstone, this volume).

Towards a theory and methodology of archaeological storytelling

Reflecting on the sudden and dramatic growth of storytelling within historical archaeology in North America in the late 1990s, James G. Gibb (2000: 2) observed the prevalent misunderstanding of archaeological storytelling, deriving from the widely maintained dichotomy between scientist and populariser, report and story. The same dichotomies and misunderstandings survive today: stories are a nice way of communicating ‘your results’ to the general public, particularly children, but they have no place in academic analysis. Gibb stresses the need for a theoretical framework for archaeological storytelling in order to address these misunderstandings (*ibid.*: 2). He notes how putting together a story can suggest new or overlooked patterns, relationships and subtleties in the material we study, such as the role of ethnicity in personal relationships (*ibid.*:3–5). Telling stories allows the archaeologist to experiment with ideas and interpretation (see Gibb, this volume).

This capacity is unquestionable. My story above challenged me to think through new possibilities about what an apparently innocent slag cake meant to the miners or smelters that produced it. It made me try and connect Galen’s description and the artefacts and structures that we were studying to the miners themselves. With the help of Earl E. Scott’s own story, I felt compelled to translate the mining galleries, pit props, amphora sherds and slag cakes into human experience. The powerful medium that constitutes storytelling then allowed me to communicate something of that experience to my audience.

For me, however, telling a story is much more than a stimulus for generating new ideas and hypotheses that can then be ‘tested’ against the data (Gibb 2000: 3). Storytelling is what makes the past relevant today. It is a bridge between the concerns of past communities (e.g. oppressive conditions in the mines) and those of present communities (e.g. ethical supply chains). It deploys tools such as irony, surprise, identification with the protagonist, and emotional reactions to the events portrayed, and uses them to challenge assumptions about how the world works and how humans relate to each other.

There is always the risk, of course, of projecting our contemporary values and interpretations onto our subject matter, thus ‘colonising the past’ (see Gibb and van Helden & Witcher, this volume). This is

demonstrated, for example, in the widespread assumption that emotions are universal and so provide a direct link between us and the individuals and characters of the past, thus driving the widespread success of historical fiction and drama (cf. Tarlow 2012: 171 and Elphinstone, this volume). I would argue that a well-crafted archaeological story can raise and explore these issues and problems, precisely by highlighting the difference between the modern storyteller and the ancient protagonist. The narrator of my story, for example, clearly starts off with a very different attitude to slag than the truck driver. Even if the story fails to approach an ancient understanding of the meaning of slag, it has enabled a discussion of the difficulty of attributing emotional attachment to apparently discarded material.

The point about storytelling that introduces specific human characters into our narratives about the past is that it embraces the role of contingency in the trajectories of human lives and communities. By doing this it acknowledges the power and agency of that historical player who is so often excluded by the neat patterns, models and structures created by the academic. Storytelling allows people to be actors in the whole drama of deliberation and choice that constitutes human society (Carr 2001: 163).

Perhaps most importantly, storytelling can help to dissipate the old myth of ‘field archaeologist as hero’, which has played such a key role in the entanglement of archaeology with class structures and colonialism (Berggren & Hodder 2003: 421–24; Given 2004: 23). Survey archaeologists – in my own experience, at least – are not masters of all they survey, nor do they spring fully informed from Zeus’ head. In my persona as narrator of the story above, I have doubts, uncertainties and considerable ignorance. It was only thanks to my chance encounter with an old man that I could come to a new understanding of the material in which I thought I was a ‘specialist’. Storytelling, as an outward-facing stance held by the archaeologist, can contribute strongly to the increasingly prominent paradigm of collaborative and co-produced archaeology (Hale et al. 2017; McAnany & Rowe 2015).

The encounter with ‘strangers in the landscape’ (Given & Seretis 2003), resulting in dialogue and storytelling by both sides, is one of the greatest challenges to insular and rarified academic paradigms, and has been transformational in my own work with landscape (e.g. see discussion of mud-brick architecture, Given 2017). When the farmer or truck driver comes up to you and demands with a little turn of their finger that you explain yourself, you become a storyteller yourself, then you listen to their story, and as a direct result of that begin to rethink your own story afresh. To stand on a mountain top with a fire lookout who is also a village elder and tradition-bearer and hear the stories of his youth in the forests around you is to rethink the infinitely complex interaction between land and people that constitutes landscape. To expel all that from your academic narrative is to be deaf and blind to the very landscape that you are trying to understand and communicate.

Like any other archaeological technique, storytelling needs an explicit and thought-out methodology. In my early experiments in archaeological storytelling I talked in the voice of the historical character. The audience reaction was hard to pin down, but I felt uncomfortable, not just with academic audiences but

also when talking to local history societies, which tend to expect authoritative, academic discourse and feel cheated if they receive anything less than that. I am an archaeologist: I do not have the authority of a Roman copper miner, or an Egyptian mule driver, and the attempt to claim it was always going to be unconvincing.

To address that I took on a new voice: that of a survey archaeologist who keeps on having encounters with strangers (with the emphasis on ‘strange’). This is, of course, entirely true: it is one of the most stimulating and enjoyable features of archaeological survey. The truth of this and my hopefully evident experience made it very easy to establish my own authority and persona as a storyteller. It also made it very easy to use slides to illustrate the stories; that is what archaeologists do, after all, unlike Roman copper miners or mule drivers.

After some five stories of my encounters with the past, I began to realise that each encounter was with the same old man, the one who appears here as a truck driver with a long memory. He has even acquired a name, Hermon, though he does not give it in this story. He cropped up in Roman-period Karanis in Egypt as a mule-driver. He was a Roman-period cart driver supplying the quarries of Aphrodisias in Turkey, and a miller in Cyprus during the Ottoman period. He even appeared in the Norse phases of Jarlshof in Shetland, where the manic frenzy fuelled by his own past reached heights never since surpassed. Through his obsessions and compulsive memories, Hermon has become a vehicle for my own attempts to move and communicate between present and past.

As I hope my section on ‘The facts’ above showed, the material, landscape and interpretation in the story is as solidly based on archaeological, historical and archaeometallurgical evidence as any academic article. In terms of plot, the transformation of understanding and perception in the narrator is entirely true to life. After all, the results and conclusions of survey archaeology derive from the archaeologist’s experience in the landscape, in the widest possible sense.

Conclusions

For those of us concerned with understanding and communicating the past, whether archaeologists, historians, novelists or storytellers, finding fruitful ways of moving between present and past is our key challenge. All of these different approaches can set up barriers instead of bridges, whether made of academic jargon, data overload, or the superficial projection of contemporary values. We can make the material culture and human lives of the past remote and abstract, or we can over-simplify them into pale reflections of our unoriginal selves.

Alternatively, we can face up to the responsibilities of the author, whether that means a writer of scholarship or of fiction, or both. We can strive to listen thoughtfully to people and data; we can engage ourselves and others with the particularity and contingency of the past; and we can work to communicate new ideas and understandings in as effective and stimulating a way as possible, regardless of the barriers that are still being built around our disciplines and the past.

Archaeological fiction in written form can do all of this, but by its very nature there is a distancing between author and reader. Because of the direct engagement and mutual listening between teller and audience, storytelling can build sharing and communication into its very structure and medium. By doing so, it can enact the same collaboration and mutual dependency that it narrates.

The character Hermon expresses the encounter that lies at the heart of archaeological interpretation. Like his almost-namesake, Hermes the messenger god, he bridges the yawning gap that lies not just between the archaeologist and their audience but between the archaeologist and the past. We all need our messengers, whether they are gods of data, hermeneutics, or narrative. For me, the messengers are my encounters with a whole range of women and men like Hermon, who make me think differently about the landscape and the past. My archaeological data and their lives and experiences together build the bridges on which we can all meet and stand together – and tell each other stories.

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