

Euro-Tag. The Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference. Southampton. 14th - 16th December 1992.

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Last year's Tag conference appropriately named Euro-Tag (like most things in Europe nowadays) was in my opinion a big success considering the number of participants and the consequent huge organization involved.

The registration fee was very reasonable indeed and took into consideration the great number of students attending. £9 was definitely worthwhile for a three day conference and some of the low price accommodation (including the free floor space) was evidently provided with students in mind.

The substantial information pack provided during registration included everything that one could possibly need to know from conference details to a city map. However I feel that a more detailed programme should have been provided with our admission letter long before the beginning of the conference.

In terms of the conference itself, a wide range of subjects covered almost every aspect within the archaeological field; Roman archaeology being perhaps the only exception. Nevertheless the latter is at last properly represented in its own separate theoretical gathering (aptly called TRAC).

The topics themselves were divided into 17 different headings which obviously allowed for a great deal of diversity. A high theoretical approach was understandably presented for every topic, although the degree of its usage varied from speaker to speaker.

One of the problems concerning Euro-Tag was the limited amount of time allocated to each individual speaker. In fact most of them clearly expressed some difficulties in getting through their vast research topics in just 15 minutes. I fully realise the constraints under which the organising committee had to work in order to maintain the duration of the conference to a reasonable length of time; allowing extra time to speakers would invariably mean extending the overall duration of the conference to perhaps unbearable limits, while making more time available through elimination of discussions would dangerously narrow the audience's participation.

A further problem of such an event is the time clashing of the various sessions. An effort was made to allocate 'incompatible' topics, which bore no apparent relation, to the same time, however the individual's choice and interests are always hard to predict and once again given the time restriction, no solution can be foreseen concerning this everlasting dilemma.

Undoubtedly the biggest attraction of the whole conference was the Tag debate and its participants, Lewis Binford, Colin Renfrew, Christopher Tilley and John Barret who understandably drew a large audience. Binford opened the debate by summarising his ideas since the publication of his now legendary article published in *American Antiquity* in 1962 entitled *Archaeology as Anthropology* and which subsequently opened a new horizon for archaeological thinking. He then expressed his concern about the psychological and philosophical background behind archaeological reasoning; how do we address our ignorance? How do we make culture? How do we get knowledge from our present one? Is our present knowledge inadequate? As usual, plenty of symbolically charged questions were formulated and not many realistic solutions were put forward, which does not come as a surprise.

Colin Renfrew showed his preoccupation with the ever growing problematic appearance of 'ethnic cleansing' and cited the modern problem of Macedonia while sympathising with the Greek cause at the same time. He went on to discuss the dangers and implications of archaeological manipulation for political purposes usually linked to large territorial claims.

However the speaker who offered some real alternatives and tangible solutions to the problems affecting the contemporary world of archaeological thinking was Christopher Tilley who postulated some objective actions to rectify some of those problems whether theoretical or practical. He presented

the audience with ten elaborate points which were diligently and simply put. Among the most important ones were: a) a radical change in the way archaeology is taught in Universities, creating a harmonious combination of theory and practice; b) re-structuring of the various regional archaeological units in this country in order to establish close research links with Universities; c) an evaluation of women's work in archaeological theory and a much needed appraisal which would bring their valuable contributions into perspective.

However as a female member of the audience rightly pointed out, it is all very well to state those needs but what about putting them into practice? It seems a rather remote possibility given the fact that the panel was constituted of four white middle-class males!

The elaborate debate that followed would need a bigger scope than the one offered by this review. However, it will suffice to say that one member of the audience put the situation into perspective by highlighting the repetitive themes and lack of originality which have characterised theoretical debate since its very beginnings and encouraged a meaningful route of action as opposed to the just verbal one undertaken up to date. Binford seemed to agree but does this mean that the situation will change? I have my doubts.

After the heavy dose of theoretical pondering, the sessions continued the following day and one in particular deserves special mention. 'The regional traditions of theoretical and archaeological research in Europe' depicted the dearth and abundance of archaeological theory in Europe which ranged from the total lack of it such as in the Irish case to the long established Scandinavian tradition such as it is found in Denmark. The best performance was magnificently provided by Heinrich Härke who used humour, irony and satirical discourse (not to mention the truth) to portray the rigidity and narrowness existent in German archaeological thinking today.

A broader theme entitled 'The identity of Europe - an archaeological perspective' was used for the afternoon session. Colin Renfrew intervened again to discuss the loosely used term 'Indo-european' language and what it really involves. He commented on the fact that people have used this term for decades to emphasize and justify their europeaness and consequent superiority. But what about the Indo bit? he asked. A language family has indeed little to do with ethnicity or identity and Renfrew argued this point wonderfully. The origins of material culture, language, genetic constitution and ethnicity must be clearly differentiated especially when the latter is 'a very moveable feast'.

Ian Hodder further questioned the idea and concept of Europe using a different perspective altogether. What are the basis for the establishment and creation of artificial boundaries in order to formulate the concept of Europe? He mentioned the Orient and its long term influence over Europe in the past in terms of cultural energy. He supported his arguments by presenting the latest evidence from the Neolithic of Anatolia, which is now closely related to the southeastern European one. Shouldn't this part of the world be treated as part of Europe, at least during Neolithic times, given the fact that it influenced and encouraged further cultural developments in the 'European Continent'? Maybe Europe's high opinion of itself should be revised and we, as Europeans, should come to realise that its present status is linked to its past history and the latter lies beyond the prestigious area we know as Europe.

The last day of the Conference was dedicated to a discussion of the world-wide current situation of archaeological theory drawing case studies from Africa, Indonesia, Japan, Latin America, China, etc. The rising importance of Iberian archaeology was made clear through a full session assigned to it. It definitely sets a trend which emphasizes the Iberian peninsula's growing and increasing importance both as a research area and as a potential producer of a new generation of archaeologists.

The conclusions to be drawn from my first Tag (but not the last) are very positive indeed. The intellectual stimulus and interaction provided by a wide society of international archaeologists is a worthwhile experience, not to mention the opportunity to hear the latest trends occurring in archaeological thinking (although some of them have been recurring for quite some time now). On the whole it is a memorable experience which I am sure will attract even bigger audiences next time.